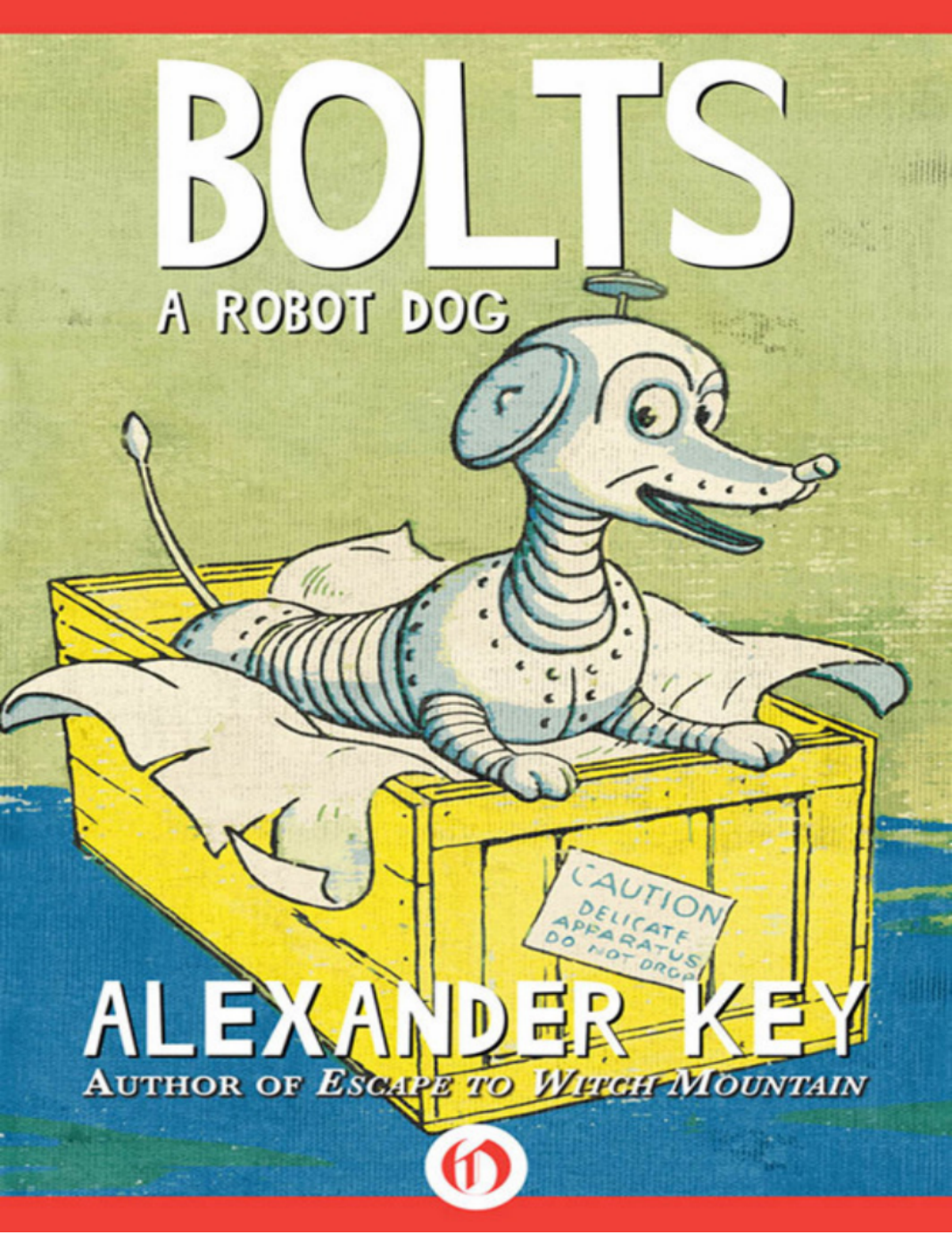
BOLTS

A ROBOT DOG



ALEXANDER KEY

AUTHOR OF *ESCAPE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN*

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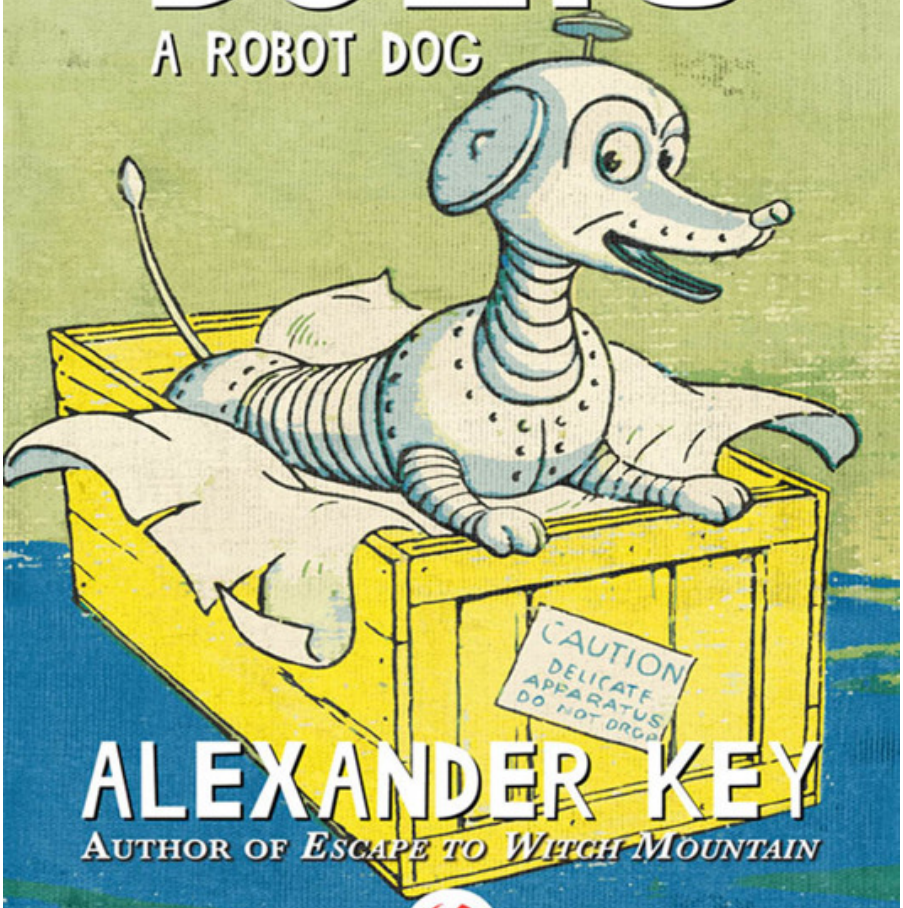

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Bolts

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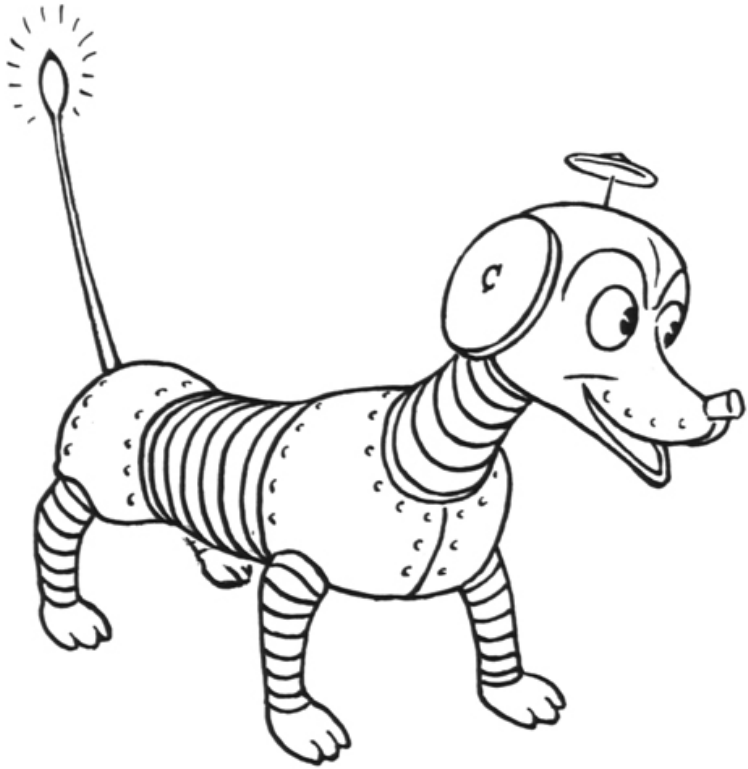

To all the faithful puppy dogs
I have known,
each of whom has contributed
his bit to the character of Bolts.

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1
He Goes to the Wrong Address

It was the strangest order that had ever come into the office of the Consolidated Mechanical Men Corporation.

The specialty of the Consolidated Mechanical Men Corporation, which made robots, was a big, clanking half-ton model that could fetch and carry half-ton loads. The corporation also made a pleasant kitchen model, which baked cookies and tended children, and some smart special models with special brains—they could add and subtract like sixty—but it had never even heard of making anything like this.

The Chief Engineer said it couldn't be done. The very thought of trying it made him blue in the face.

The Head Designer (who designed heads) said that the head on the plans was impossible, improbable, and impractical. He also said it was bound to be unbalanced, unsafe, unmannerly, and entirely unsatisfactory. "And anyhow," he added, "what could we do for a brain?"

The Brain Designer (who designed brains for the heads designed by the Head Designer) shook his long head and said some very long words, all of which meant simply, "Nothing. The whole thing's cuckoo."

It was only the Office Boy who thought it could be done. Being too young to know that it couldn't be done, he said, "Aw, it's just a dog! We make everything else. What's so hard about making a little old dog?"

"Bah! We make mechanical men—not mechanical dogs," grumbled the Chief Engineer. "Who ever heard of a robot dog? Who wants it, anyway?"

"The name on the plans is B. B. Brown," said the Office Boy. "Why, I know him! Everybody calls him Bingo Brown, and when it comes to inventing things, he's *really* smart. They say he helps his grandfather design all those secret gadgets we make for the Navy."

"You mean to tell us he's Commander Bridgewater Brown's assistant?"

"I do," said the Office Boy, though he thought it wiser not to mention that Bingo wasn't yet twelve.

"Well, if he's old Bridgewater Brown's kin and helper," said the Chief Engineer, "he can't be a nitwit. Maybe we'd better give the thing

a whack."

So they gave it a whack.

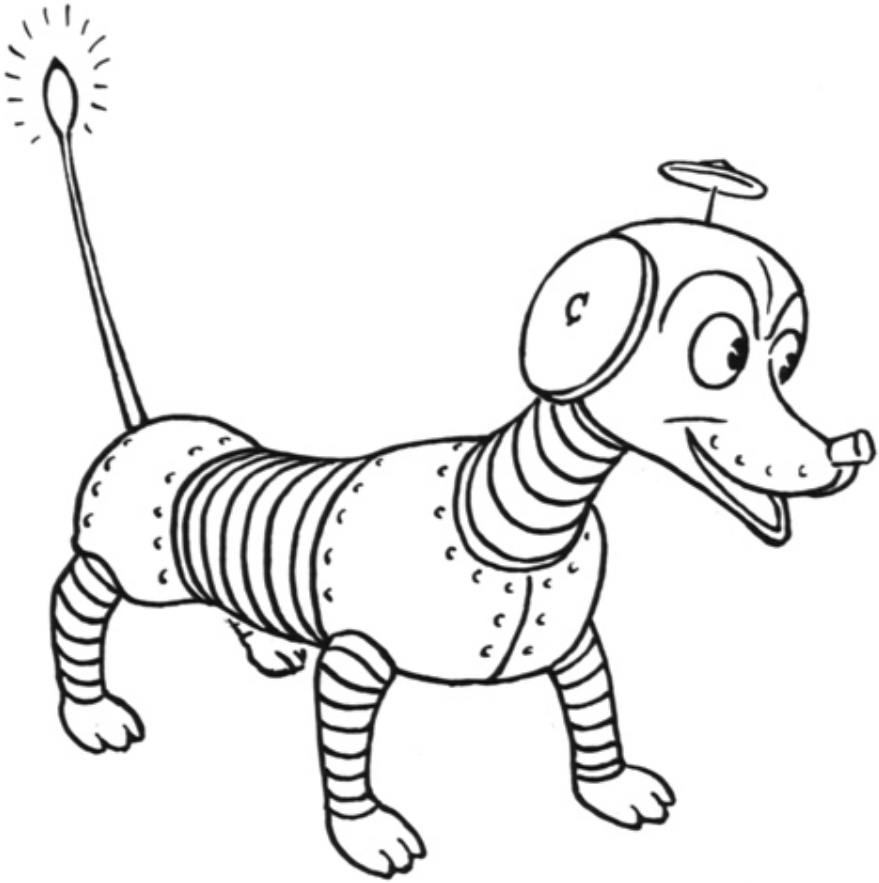
The assembly line in the factory of the Consolidated Mechanical Men Corporation was so long that all the robot workers had to use roller skates. Whenever the big boss robot pressed the button at the beginning of the line, there would be a mighty whirring clatter, a quick zipping and purring, and a thousand mechanical hands would begin punching, twisting, driving, pounding, and slamming things together. Rods and wires, nuts and bolts, bulbs and sockets, springs and sprockets, and millions of little wheels and cogs would suddenly take shape. Then like magic, zip, zip, zip, one new robot after another would slide off the end of the speeding belt.

But the assembly line wasn't geared for this kind of robot.

The first time they gave it a whack, the assembly line jammed, making an awful mess. Only after they had cleaned the line, oiled it with a zippier zip oil, and given it a stronger whack, did a smallish doglike shape appear.

It was a bit smaller than it should have been, but it was the best the factory could do. As it neared the end of the assembly line, a tentacle plucked down a slightly misshapen brain box—which was all that the brain department could manage—trimmed it a bit to make it fit, and slammed it into place. It was this trimming, unfortunately, that gave Bolts his failings, as well as some of his peculiarities.

As he slid off the assembly line, the Inspector stared at him and shook his head. Bolts, as he had been named on the plans, looked like a cross between a poodle and a dachshund, plus something from outer space. He had short jointed legs, a longish jointed body, and a funny sort of head that was much too big for the rest of him.



“What would anyone want with a thing like you?” the Inspector muttered, not knowing that Bolts had been designed for a very particular purpose, and that he had turned out a bit smaller than Bingo Brown had planned.

Bolts didn’t answer because his switch wasn’t on yet. He merely lay still and listened while the Inspector inspected him, oiled his joints, and stamped his number, name, and master’s name on the plate covering his switch box. The plate now read: Z-1—BOLTS—B. B. Brown.

Finally, the Inspector turned him on for testing.

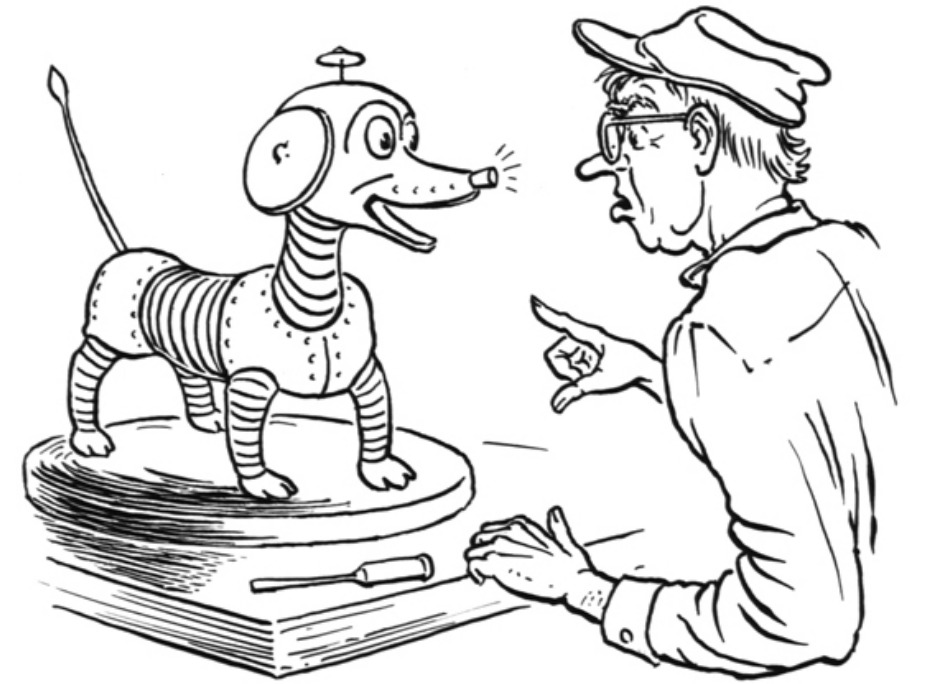
The moment his eye lights brightened and he began to tick, Bolts jumped to his feet, finding it quite wonderful to be alive. Instantly he raised the steel hackles on the back of his neck, snapped out a set of teeth that would have made a barracuda happy, and gave a frightful “G-r-r-r-r!”

“Hey!” yelled the Inspector, leaping back. “Don’t you bite me!”

Bolts slid his hinged teeth out of sight, thoroughly satisfied with them. “Nope,” he said gruffly. “Won’t. Just testing.”

"Better watch it," cautioned the Inspector. "I don't like those trick teeth. In fact, I don't like anything about you."

"Feeling's mutual," grumbled Bolts. "You gonna stand there all day not liking me?"



"Not if I can help it. But I'm not turning a thing like you loose on the world till I've checked you thoroughly. Now, your name is Bolts Brown, and you—"

"Reckon I know my own name. I'm no stupe."

"Well, you look like a stupe. Do you know to whom you belong?"

"Natch. I been conditioned. Bingo Brown's my master. They don't come better—so don't make no cracks about him, see?"

The Inspector sighed. "At least you have loyalty. You're going to Battleship Lane, where Bingo lives with his grandfather and a proper robot named Butch. Er—do you like cats?"

"Cats are great critters. So are birds. I love 'em all."

"That seems to be the right answer," the Inspector said doubtfully, glancing at his list. "Though I don't understand it. What about dogs?"

"I'm a dawg myself. But let me catch some mangy, lop-eared, low-down, bone-snatching cur come meddling with Bingo! Brother, I'll chew him—but good. Whaddaya think I got teeth for?"

"I did wonder," the Inspector admitted, shuddering. "But I'm afraid that makes you very dangerous. Would you bite a human being?"

"Aw, I wouldn't really hurt nobody. I *tell* you I been conditioned."

“I doubt if you’ve been conditioned enough.” The Inspector shook his head. “Your speech is absolutely terrible. So are your manners. I’m afraid you’ll never be a proper robot.”

Bolts spun his rotary nose about, and decided he had a sniffer to be proud of. “What’s the diff? I’m only a dawg. Plenty smart, though.”

“I’m afraid not,” the Inspector said sadly. “Your brain had to be trimmed to make it fit.”

“So what?” said Bolts, sniffing him. “Trimmed off the nonsense. Left the smart part. Let’s get on with this. I don’t like your smell.”

“You’re not conditioned to my smell,” snapped the Inspector, getting on with his checking. He was very glad to finish it, turn Bolts off, and pack him into a box to be delivered to his new master.

The box was carted into the shipping room and placed beside another box exactly like it. The shipping clerk was in a hurry that morning, and he made a slight mistake. The names and addresses he wrote were entirely correct—but they were written on the wrong boxes.

So it happened that the box containing Bolts was loaded into a truck that drove away in the opposite direction from Battleship Lane.

Bolts had no way of knowing this. He wasn’t much of a worrier, and being turned off, he couldn’t have worried if he had wanted to. All he could do was wonder a bit. Having a built-in clock, he was aware that time was passing, and he wondered why so much of it had to pass. He had sort of got the idea that Battleship Lane wasn’t far away.

The truck rolled on, hour after hour. Bolts couldn’t move his sniffer, but smells came to him, seeping in through a crack. He didn’t try to count them, for his counting was limited, but there were heavenly smells and some not so heavenly, and hundreds of middling ones in between. What with wondering about them, and the changing sounds, he passed the time quite comfortably.

Suddenly the truck stopped. There were muffled shouts, angry voices that were silenced by a quick order, then running footsteps. Abruptly the box was jerked from the truck, carried a few feet, and thrust into another vehicle that went bouncing away at top speed.

Bolts was still trying to puzzle out what had happened, when the bouncing and jolting ceased. Again he heard running footsteps, and once more the box was lifted and carried a short distance. There were grunts and whispers as the box was set down. All at once he heard a roar, and the third part of the strange journey began.

Curiously, the box rode smoothly now, and the smells and sounds didn’t change. About the only sound was the roar. His basic learning tapes had told him a bit about air travel, and Bolts wondered if he could be flying to Battleship Lane. Not that it mattered, as long as he got there. Battleship Lane was home.

But there was that funny business when the first truck was stopped. Though the voices had been muffled, he could remember one word because it had been the loudest. It had sounded like "holdup." According to his language tape, a holdup was a kind of halt. Of course it had another meaning—something to do with stealing—but that didn't make sense. Who would want to steal a robot dog named Bolts Brown? Shucks, he thought, what's there to worry about? If I just keep plugging along, I'm bound to wind up at Battleship Lane.

After three hours, and some odd minutes that he didn't feel were worth counting, the roaring stopped. The box bounced a time or two, and for a minute all was quiet. Then he heard excited voices and hurrying footsteps. The box was lifted and carried a short distance and set down in a place full of strange smells.

Bolts, in spite of being turned off, felt a tingling through all his circuits. This must be Battleship Lane. In a few seconds he would see his master. He didn't know exactly what Bingo Brown looked like, except that he was a boy, had red hair, wore glasses, had brains to spare, and without question would have the very finest of all boy smells. It didn't take any imagination to know that it would be a heavenly smell composed of ordinary boy smell mixed with a certain amount of dirt, a touch of soap—though not too much of it—plus liniment, pet frogs, old shoes and socks, jam, machine oil, tools, and chemicals.

As the lid came off the box, Bolts was aware of a tremendous number of strange smells, mainly dirt, but the boy smell was missing. Immediately a faint buzzing started in a corner of his trimmed-off brain. It was rather uncomfortable.

Must be my built-in instinct at work, Bolts thought. Yup, something's kinda wrong here.

Hands reached into the box and tore away the paper and packing around him. There were sudden exclamations of astonishment.

"Comrade Pang, you simpleton," a rumbling voice roared accusingly, "*you've stolen the wrong thing*!"

"Im*p*ossible!" came the sharp reply. "I do not make mistakes, Major Mangler. See, it is in the right box, with the right address. It *has* to be the new Brown Super-Thought Machine."

"Bah! Does this foolish contraption look as if it could do any super thinking?"

"Well, it does look like a stupid robot dog," Comrade Pang admitted. "But I never judge a book by its cover. The new Brown invention is quite small, and *very* secret. The dog shape could be a disguise."

"We'll soon find out," rumbled Major Mangler, and Bolts was aware of a hand fumbling about the cover of his switch box. "Hold the

lantern nearer, Comrade Pang. What does it say here on the plate?"

"H'mm. It says: Z-1—BOLTS—B. B. Brown. Ha! What did I tell you? B. B. Brown is certainly Commander Bridgewater Brown. The Z-1 means it's the only model of its kind—so it's bound to be the Super-Thought Machine! And they've named it Bolts just to add to the disguise. Am I right?"

"I hope you are," growled the major.

"And by the seven plagues, you'd *better* be! Turn the thing on. Let's see what kind of super thoughts we can get out of it."

A hand reached into his switch box. CLICK! Bolts was turned on.

It was so wonderful to feel the power from his little atomic battery going through him again that Bolts could hardly restrain himself from jumping out of the box. But just in time he realized the trouble he was in. He decided to play it as smart as an ignorant dog could and look carefully before he leaped.

Slowly, while he gathered his feet under him, he raised his head and blinked his eye lights at the two men peering down at him. The big rumbly one called Major Mangler seemed to be all jaw and bristling whiskers. Comrade Pang, who held the lantern, was a thin little yellow man with a face like a hatchet.

The sight of this curious pair rather shook Bolts's confidence. A dog just couldn't put any faith in such characters—and it didn't help at all to remember that he was green off the assembly line, with no experience at all in the world's wickedness.

The major bent over, poked a thick finger at him, and demanded, “Speak up and explain yourself! What are you?”

“Dawg,” said Bolts, blinking innocently while he tried to get some idea of the sort of place he was in.

“Answer my questions! I know what you look like. I want to know what you really are. Why were you made? What is your purpose?”

“Aw, how would I know?” said Bolts. “Why don’t you ask the robot factory? and don’t stand so close—I don’t like your smell!” There was a door, he saw, about three jumps away. It seemed to be latched, but maybe he could open it with his flexible paws if he was fast enough.

Comrade Pang laughed. “Watch him, Comrade Major! He’s a foxy one.”

“Turn him off!” Major Mangler ordered angrily. “I’ll find out how foxy he is, if I have to tear him apart and sizzle all his circuits!”

Bolts waited no longer. He snapped out his frightening trick teeth, raised the steel hackles on his neck—which quite changed his innocent appearance—and gave a hair-raising “Gr-r-r-r-r!” as he sprang from the box.

Being top-heavy, and not yet practiced in jumping, he turned a complete somersault before he landed. But Comrade Pang and the major were too startled by the teeth and the growl to notice this awkwardness, and Bolts reached the door untouched.

The door was latched. He leaped for the latch and managed to raise it with his flexible paws.

Major Mangler bellowed, “Don’t let him get away! Stop him! Stop him!”

The heavy door creaked open an inch, but there wasn’t time to swing it wider. Comrade Pang was rushing upon him, the lantern in one hand, a long stick in the other.

Bolts whirled, dodged the stick, and opened his mouth a bit wider to set off his Number Two growl. His ordinary growl sounded dangerous enough, but here in the closed room his Number Two was a frightful thing. It came out in a snarling roar that froze Comrade Pang in his tracks and even stopped the major—and the major was a man who was seldom stopped by anything.

Just to put a proper finish to it, Bolts snapped his teeth on Comrade Pang’s trousers, ripped off a sizable bit of cloth, then sprang to the door. This time he thrust it open and dashed out into the night.

Behind him he heard the major shouting in a fury. “After him! Everybody after him! Tell Lopez to call his guards! We’ve got to catch that little monster if it’s the last thing we do!”

2
He Turns Up Missing

Several hours after the box containing Bolts was carried away in one direction, the other box that should have had Bolts inside was brought to Battleship Lane.

It was nearly dark by the time the truck rolled into the lane. Big Butch, the huge clumpy robot who took care of Commander Brown, had been watching for it all afternoon. Butch, wearing a kitchen apron and a chef's cap, should have been doing a hundred other things—but how can you keep your mind on your cooking when a new member as special as Bolts is due to arrive at any moment? A real robot dog! Nothing had delighted Big Butch more in all the time he had lived on Battleship Lane.

As the truck rolled up to the door, Big Butch took one look at it and went thumping through the house, crying out, "Hey Bingo! Come quick! Bolts is here!"

It was electrifying news. It woke up Pirate, the commander's old green parrot, who immediately started squawking, "All hands on deck! Look alive! Butch says Bolts is here!" It made Claws, the commander's black cat, forget about mouse-hunting, and it brought red-headed Bingo and the bald-headed commander on the run—Commander Brown puffing and wheezing, and Bingo crying excitedly, "Hot diggity!" while he dashed for the door as fast as his skinny legs could carry him.

They all poured eagerly outside, Bingo in the lead, with Pirate squawking on his shoulder, followed by big clumpy Butch, curious Claws, the cat, and the puffing commander, who was waddling proof that Butch was entirely too clever in the kitchen.

In the lane they stopped, surprised to see the truck driver unloading a box. Somehow no one had realized that Bolts would come crated. Even Bingo had had the idea that Bolts would arrive with his switch turned on, and would hop yapping off the truck, with his tail wagging.

"Bad business!" squawked Pirate as the truck driver put the box on the ground and Bingo signed for it. "Very bad business! Something's wrong! Something's wrong!"

"Pipe down!" ordered the commander. "There's nothing wrong about Bolts's being crated. Butch, take him into the shop. We can't unpack him out here."

"Aye, aye, sir," the big robot said uneasily, for Pirate had a perfectly awful instinct that was nearly always right. As he picked up the box and carried it into the workshop, he hoped that Bolts would be everything that Bingo wanted him to be. No one needed a dog more than Bingo Brown—but it had to be a very special robot dog, and not

a real one. A real one simply wouldn't do, especially for space traveling.

"I hope his growl is just right," Bingo said anxiously, hurrying to bring tools. His mass of red hair seemed to be aflame with excitement, but his eyes behind his huge horn-rimmed glasses were suddenly worried.

"Aw, he'll have a howling horror of a growl—and teeth to go with it," Big Butch assured him. "Don't pay any attention to that crazy bird."

"I'm not a crazy bird!" Pirate cried angrily. "I'm older than Bilgewater, and twice as wise. And I know what's what."

Commander Brown glared at his parrot. "Do you want to be court-martialed?" he said severely. "My name is Bridgewater—not Bilgewater. Only my worst friends call me that. Hurry up, Butch—open that box!"

"Aye, aye, sir. One moment, sir. You forget, sir, that I'm not allowed to do shopwork in this uniform."

Quickly, Big Butch took off his kitchen apron and his chef's cap, and drew on a leather shop apron and a blue cap with crossed anchors. Properly attired, he reached for the tools and very carefully pried open the cover of the box.

The thing inside that should have been Bolts was covered with heavy wrapping paper. Bingo's eager hands tore the wrapping aside. He stared.

Everyone stared.

"I told you so!" cackled Pirate, flapping his wings. "I told you so! I told you so!"

"Aw, button your beak!" Big Butch told him out of the side of his mouth. "You old crow! You oughta be plucked and boiled for the cat." He peered again into the box. "I declare," he muttered, "isn't this the Super-Thought Machine we designed for the Navy?"

"I'll be scuttled and sunk!" the commander burst out. "It *is* our Super-Thought Machine. But what's it doing here?"

"Mix-up! Mix-up! Mix-up!" Pirate squawked.

"Oh, my goodness," muttered Bingo, looking sick, "I'll bet Pirate's right. They must have packed Bolts in a box just like this, and got the boxes mixed. That means Bolts is on his way to the Navy instead of here!"

Fuming and wheezing, the commander waddled to the phone and called the robot factory. His round face grew red as he talked. Suddenly the single hair on top of his shiny head began to tremble. "What?" he bellowed suddenly. "Oh, this is terrible!"

"W-what's happened, Pops?" Bingo asked worriedly, as his grandfather slammed down the receiver.

"Son," Commander Brown said grimly, "Bolts has been abducted."

"Oh, no!" Bingo looked sicker than ever. "B-but how—why—who —"

"Skulduggery! Skulduggery!" squawked Pirate. "Foreign agents! Spies!"

"Yes," said the commander. "It's obvious that the persons who did it believed they were stealing the Super-Thought Machine. They held up

the truck, loaded the box on another truck, and carried it to a plane. But that's all anyone knows. It was a strange, fast plane, and now it's vanished without a trace."

"This is awful," Big Butch said miserably. "Poor Bolts! If foreign agents have stolen him, we may never get to see him."

"Don't talk like that," Bingo pleaded. "He's my dog, and I'm going to find him!"

The commander shook his head. "I don't see how, son. He was stolen hours and hours ago. By this time he could be in Europe or down in South America."

"But—but there must be *something* we can do," Bingo persisted.

For a while everyone was silent, trying desperately to think of an idea. Even Claws, the cat, seemed very much concerned, for he kept twitching his whiskers and scratching his head. But unfortunately Claws, if he had a thought, could only make purry noises that no one understood, unless it was Pirate.

Suddenly Bingo looked at the parrot. "Snap out of it, Pirate, and give us some help. What's Bolts doing now?"

"Running from trouble," squawked Pirate. "Running from trouble."

"Why," said Bingo, "he'd have to be turned on if he's running—and if he's running from trouble, that means he's escaped! There's a chance we can get in touch with him by radio. Oh, if only we knew where he was!"

At that moment, Bolts, hundreds and hundreds of miles away, was wondering the same thing.

As he dashed out into the strange and starry night, he heard a confusion of voices all around him, most of them in a language that certainly wasn't English. Great jumping dingbats, he thought. I must be in a foreign country! How'm I ever gonna get out of it and reach Battleship Lane?

But there wasn't time to worry about that. Comrade Pang and his big stick were only three leaps behind him—and ahead, appearing from every direction, were jabbering men with dark ugly faces. They were trying to head him off.

Bolts dodged to the left, wishing he had longer legs and more experience in using them. Being fresh off the assembly line made it twice as rough, for it wasn't at all easy to keep his balance and cover distance in a hurry. Once he took a tumble, going heels right over head. But in an instant he was up, dodging again as men came leaping into his path.

Suddenly he saw a stone wall looming in front of him. He looked frantically for an opening through it, but there was none. He whirled, and found himself facing a line of jabbering figures.

He was cornered.

What was a poor dog to do if he wanted to save his tin hide?

Just in the nick of time Bolts remembered that he not only had teeth to be proud of, but a special Number Three growl that would put his frightful Number Two to shame. It was supposed to be used only outdoors, where it wouldn't shatter windows, and only in an emergency of the most desperate kind.

Well, this did seem like an emergency, and a pretty desperate one at that. In a flash he opened his mouth, snapped out his terrible teeth, raised the steel hackles on his neck, and loosened his unspeakable Number Three. Then he charged.

Ninety-seven lions, all tied in a bundle and tearing each other to bits, couldn't have sounded worse. Afterward even Bolts didn't like to think about that Number Three growl. It did such awful things to his circuits that there was no pleasure at all in seeing his enemies drop like quivering lumps of jelly, with their blood turned to water. Anyway, escaping was no problem. Bolts kept moving, fast, and not a soul tried to stop him.

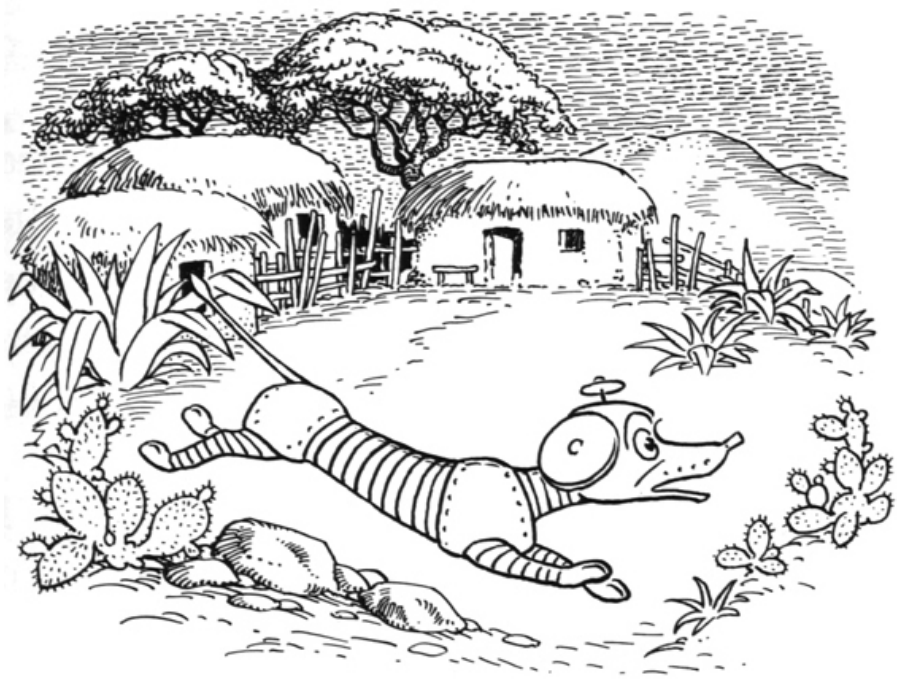
He whipped past a row of huts along the edge of a village, wiggled through a fence, and tore lickety-split down a rocky gully that led out into open country. Not until the village was far behind did he pause and look around. There was no sign of pursuit.

Now what should he do?

The best course, he figured, was simply to follow his nose. If he had patience, and followed his nose long enough, he was bound to end up in Battleship Lane. With such a sniffer as his, he didn't see how he could miss it.

Bolts turned slowly about, rotating his sniffer. He sifted through a few dozen interesting smells, chose the most exciting one, and began trotting hopefully in the direction of it. In a few minutes he came to a narrow trail that seemed to be used only by animals with hooves. His sniffer told him it was a trail well worth following, so he took it.

"What lonesome country!" he said aloud, just to keep himself company. "Sure hope I don't have to go through much of this to reach Battleship Lane."



It was really quite dreadful country, all covered with stones and patches of cactus. In the bright starlight he could see it stretching away for a great distance. His sharp eyes could make out only one living thing in sight—it was some sort of smallish hooved critter ahead on the trail. Bolts barked at it by way of greeting, but the sound only frightened the hooved critter and it started to run.

"Hey, what's the big rush?" Bolts called to it. "Nobody's gonna bite you."

The hooved critter stopped. It turned and stared back at him curiously. Bolts trotted up to it, sniffing. Suddenly the hooved critter —it looked like a small donkey—twitched its big ears and said loudly, "Hee-haw! Ha! Ha! Hee-haw!"

"Hee-haw yourself!" Bolts snapped. "I don't claim to be no prize beauty—but do you have to laugh at a feller?"

"I'm not laughing," retorted the critter. "That's only my way of saying hello."

"Say, you're *talking*!" Bolts exclaimed. "I didn't know a real critter could talk!"

"I'm *not* talking," the critter told him. "I think you're just hearing what I'd say if I *could* talk."

"Ump!" muttered Bolts, puzzled. "Something's mighty queer here."

"It can't be me. I'm only an ordinary burro, and on the smallish side —but I've got common sense. It has to be you. You're queer-looking, and you even talk a queer language—but somehow I know what you

say. Must be something in your head that does it. What are you, anyway?"

"Tin dawg," said Bolts, wondering about his head. "Nothing wrong with me—except that I sorta got shortchanged here and there. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm no stupe—just kinda shy on knowledge, is all. Factory had to trim my brain to make it fit."

"Maybe it's your trimmed brain that does it," the burro suggested. "Doesn't it feel sensitive around the edges?"

"Yup, it sure does." Bolts blinked his eye lights in sudden understanding. "By Joe, that's the answer! It's all those exposed circuit ends. Well! Well! It's really a comfort to be able to yak a bit with a guy like you. Where you heading?"

"Anyplace but where I was!" The little burro glanced back nervously in the direction of the village. "Didn't you hear the racket? Scared me so I jumped clean out of the corral, which is practically impossible. But when you hear something like ninety-seven mountain lions—"

"Oh, that was me," Bolts admitted. "Me an' my Number Three growl. I had to use it to escape." He explained what had happened. "Sorry I shivered you so—but I mighty near shivered myself. That Number Three is rough!"

"It's murder. Don't—ever—use—it—near—me—again."

"Won't," Bolts promised. "That is, if you'll keep me company for a spell. Looks mighty lonesome out here."

"Suits me, brother. Now that I'm out of that corral, I wouldn't go back if they paved it with oats. Any master's better than Lumpy Lopez—except Comrade Pang and that hairy major. He's afraid to shave because he might be recognized. He's wanted everywhere."

"Wouldn't trust none of 'em with a lead penny. What are they, anyway?"

"Bandits, thieves, spies, foreign agents, conniving cutthroats—you name it, and they're it. If one's any worse than the other, their own mothers wouldn't know it. I've heard they're all in the pay of the Mongolians, which I fear is very bad."

"We'd better get going," said Bolts. "They're liable to come after me in spite of my growl. I'm valuable, you know."

"You sure don't look it."

"Never judge a book by its cover," Bolts quoted as they began to trot along the trail. "There's a possibility, my friend, that I'm a Super-Thought Machine. At least, that's what they think I am."

"What would that be?" asked the burro.

"How would I know?"

"If you're a Super-Thought Machine, you'd know it. I haven't heard a super thought out of you yet."

“Well, that does make sense,” Bolts admitted. “Anyway, I’d rather be what I am instead of something I ain’t. Do you know where Battleship Lane is?”

“Never heard of it. What is it?”

“Home,” said Bolts. “I got folks there. I’m surprised you don’t know about it. It’s bound to be a well-known place. Hey, stop a minute—I hear dawgs behind us.”

They stopped and listened.

“Those are lion dogs,” the burro said uneasily. “They belong to Lumpy. Sounds as if they’re after us.”

“What kind of critter is a lion dawg?”

“Big, tough, and ugly—and they’re the only things I know that wouldn’t be afraid of your growl. Lumpy uses them to hunt mountain lions when he isn’t out cutting throats. Brother, we’d better really move!”

Bolts and the burro began to race down the trail.

3
He Tangles with Trouble

While Bolts and the burro were running for their lives Bingo and Commander Brown were pacing worriedly around the workshop, trying to plan what to do. Because of the trouble over Bolts, Big Butch was unusually late with dinner tonight, and the commander was fit to be tied. He couldn't think without food, yet some very quick and right-on-the-ball thinking had to be done.

A great deal depended on finding Bolts, and finding him soon.

"I can't understand it," said Bingo. "I've been signaling him for a half hour, but he doesn't answer. He's supposed to have a built-in radio like the one Butch has. If he's turned on, he *must* be able to hear me."

"Maybe he's not turned on yet," muttered the hungry commander.

"But, Pops, he *has* to be turned on. It's plain logic. Whoever stole the other box would certainly open it as soon as he could."

"H'mp, yes, I suppose so," came the grumpy reply.

"And naturally," Bingo went on, "anybody finding Bolts inside would be curious enough to turn him on."

"Naturally, naturally."

"And once he's turned on," argued Bingo, "he's bound to escape. How could you hold a dog like Bolts?"

"Wouldn't want to try it," growled the commander. "Not with those teeth."

"Then why doesn't he answer when I signal him?" Bingo cried. "What's wrong?"

The commander threw up his hands. "Don't ask me!" he fumed. "How can I think when I'm starving to death?" He glared in the direction of the kitchen, then bellowed in sudden wrath, "What's holding you, Butch? You know I need food!"

Pirate flapped his wings and cackled to Big Butch, "Shake the lead out of your feet, you tin dummy, and look alive! Bilge-water needs his chow!"

At that moment Big Butch struck the dinner gong and called, "Chow's on! Come an' get it!"

"Heaven be praised," breathed the commander, too relieved to give Pirate a dressing down. He waddled hurriedly into the dining alcove and settled himself gratefully before a table heaped with enough food

to stuff a whale.

Bingo had no appetite at all. “Pops,” he said presently, “if you don’t go easy on those biscuits, you’ll *never* be able to squeeze yourself into the Space Jumper. Then where will we be?”

“Without Bolts,” replied the commander, “we’ll be nowhere. Without food I can’t think, and without thought we’ll never find him. However”—he paused to deal with another biscuit—“I’m feeling better already. Now, it occurs to me that one of two things is wrong. Either Pirate doesn’t know what he’s talking about or—”

“I do too! I do too!” the parrot squawked. “I’m never wrong!”

“If you’re so smart,” Bingo said, “why don’t you tell us where he is?”

“Aw, you want too much out of a bird,” grumbled Pirate. “I can’t force my second sight. It has to come when it comes.”

“Very well,” said the commander. “If Pirate’s right, we’ll have to assume that something is wrong with Bolts. Call him again, Bingo. Only give it more power this time. Maybe he needs a little jolt to tingle his circuits.”

Bingo went to the very super radio in the corner of the shop, which he had tuned to the special robot wave that only Big Butch and Bolts could hear. He turned it up to full power, so that it positively whined and shot bands of blue light all around it. He pressed the sending button, which sent sizzling impulses jumping around the earth, and spoke loudly into the mouthpiece: “Bingo calling Bolts! Bingo calling Bolts! Please come in, Bolts!”

In the kitchen Big Butch gave a sudden yelp and instantly turned off his own built-in set. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “That’s hot! You trying to sizzle us down, Bingo?”

Poor Bolts, far off in a strange desert, felt a sudden stinging in his tail as if he’d been nipped by a playful streak of lightning. “Ow! Wow! Ow! Oh-h-h-h-h!” he bawled, and jumped so hard he turned a complete somersault.

“What’s the matter?” asked the little burro, who was racing along beside him. “Did a scorpion sting you?”

“Dunno,” muttered Bolts. “Something bit me, but good!”

“We have awful scorpions in this country,” the burro told him. “Though it seems odd that one can hurt a tin dog. By the way, were you holding your tail straight up when it happened?”

“Yup,” Bolts admitted. “Believe I was. Didn’t mean to, ’cause every time I hold it up, a buzzing starts through me.”

“That’s odd,” said the burro. “But I’ve noticed a peculiar thing about you. Every time your tail sticks up straight, a light flashes at the end of it. I can’t imagine the purpose of it, but I must say it’s quite decorative.”

“Pshaw!” grumbled Bolts, disgusted. “Who wants a light in the end of his tail?”

It might be decorative, he thought, but he sure didn’t like it. And at night, when he was being pursued, it could be downright dangerous. Those rascally lion dogs, he realized, were getting closer. And what was that behind the dogs? Men on horses?

As they topped a small rise, the burro glanced back. “That’s Lumpy Lopez—with Comrade Pang and the major. We’d better put more speed on.”

“I’m putting all I got into it,” Bolts told him. “My legs are too short. Looks like we’d better start using our heads instead of our feet. Can’t you think of something?”

“There’s a cactus forest ahead of us,” the burro said. “That’s our best chance. The dogs can follow us in there—but the men and horses can’t. The cactus stands up too high; the thorns would tear them to pieces.”

“Lead on,” growled Bolts. “I’ll handle those dawg varmints.”

The lion dogs were very close by the time they reached the first tall clumps of cactus. The little burro lowered his head and plunged into the tangle. A few feet above the ground the thick branching cactus made an almost impenetrable cover. It stopped the galloping horsemen, but the lion dogs came on, barking furiously.

When they reached a small open area deep in the tangle, Bolts

whirled and faced the dogs. The first close sight of them here in the dimness rather dampened his confidence. Each one looked three times as big as himself, and forty times as mean. He decided at once that even his worst growl wouldn't help him too much with such ornery critters. If they were used to tangling with mountain lions, they probably thrived on snarls and growls.

Mebbe I'd better talk to 'em with my trimmed-off brain, Bolts thought to himself. There's a lot of power in the right kind of words.

The huge dogs bared their teeth and leaped toward him, snarling.

Bolts sidestepped very neatly, and said, "What's the big rush, fellers? You lose something?"

It was the wrong approach, as he found out instantly. All they did was back up for a moment in surprise, then come at him again, this time using language that no self-respecting dog would think of using. It was positively shocking. Bolts decided it was time he taught them a lesson.

"Why, you mangy, low-down, flea-bitten, knuckleheaded tramps," he roared fiercely, snapping out his trick teeth and raising the sharp hackles on his neck. "I'll show you who's tough! I'm the toughest critter alive! I'm all steel, and armor-plated! I'm a rip-rarin' thunderbolt, full o' dynamite and lightning! I'm gonna cut you both down to size, unzip you good, and chaw you up for the buzzards!"

He whirled upon them, using teeth and talk.

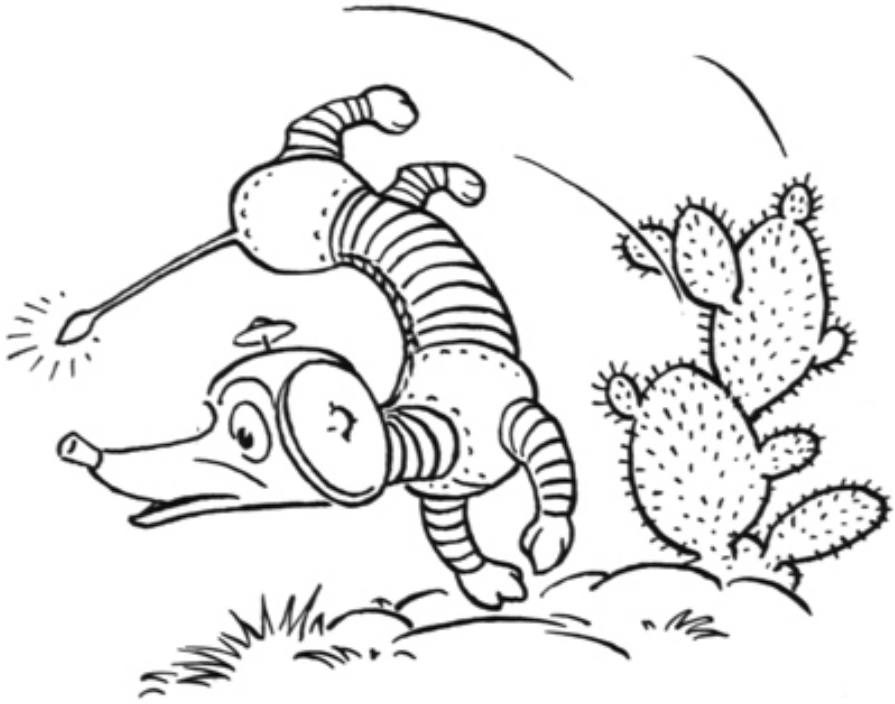
Whether it was his outrageously tough talk or his very tough teeth that did the work, Bolts didn't know. But in less than a minute his opponents gave up trying to damage his metal hide and fled with frightened yelps.

Now Bolts could hear angry shouts from the horsemen. "What are we going to do?" cried Comrade Pang in his sharp voice. "If we don't catch that little monster, we're in trouble. Whatever he is, he knows *entirely* too much about us."

"Get more dogs!" bellowed Major Mangler. "Get more men! He's *got* to be stopped!"

Bolts couldn't help a slight shiver as he heard these ominous plans. Then he told himself, "Aw, I'll worry about that later. If I can handle a couple no-account curs, I can sure take on a few more."

Feeling quite proud of himself, he turned to hunt for the little burro. But in his pride he forgot about his tail, which naturally snapped up straight. Instantly the light on the end of it flashed, and a sizzling scorpion seemed to sting him again.



"Yipe!" he burst out, turning another somersault and landing hard on his sniffer. Shaken, he got to his feet. "Looks like pride goes before a fall," he mumbled. "But it sure is queer. Seems like a feller oughta be able to hold his tail up in proper fashion without getting himself stung. Guess I got short-changed in more ways than one."

Carefully holding his tail down, Bolts hurried through the cactus and caught up with his companion.

"I don't know what you did to them," said the burro, still twitching with nervousness. "But it sounded ghastly. Perfectly ghastly. Did you completely unzip them?"

"Aw," Bolts said modestly, "it was mainly talk. There's all kinds of power in the right sort of words—but you sure gotta choose 'em carefully for the occasion. Where do we go from here?"

"On to the mountains. They are not far ahead."

"Ump!" muttered Bolts. "I didn't figger on mountains. Do we have to cross 'em to reach Battleship Lane?"

"I would imagine so. Since the place you seek isn't on this side, it almost has to be on the other side. But you'll have to cross over alone. I'm staying in the cactus."

Bolts's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Naw! How can you live in a prickly place like this? Thought a critter like you had to have grass and water."

"Not when there's cactus to eat."

"You *eat* this stuff?"

"Certainly. If you know how to nibble it, tender young cactus is perfectly delectable. Furthermore, I'm quite safe here. You see, there are lions in the mountains."

"Lions!"

"Indeed, yes. Mountain lions. Unfortunately, they find burros delectable. I'll miss your good company, but I'd prefer to remain here and eat—instead of going on to be eaten."

Live and learn, thought Bolts. This sure was a tough world for a tin dawg to be lost in. Mountains and hungry lions ahead of him, Comrade Pang and the major and all Lumpy's cutthroats behind him, and not a friend save the burro this side of Battleship Lane. On top of it the factory had shortchanged him all around, and doubled his misery by putting a scorpion in his tail. What was a poor dawg going to do?

At this moment Bingo and the commander were hovering over their special radio. "I'm sure I heard him a couple times," said Bingo. "But he always cuts me off. Doesn't he know he's got a built-in radio?"

"Dumb dog!" squawked Pirate. "Dumb dog! No brains!"

"He's *not* a dumb dog," Bingo told the parrot. "He's a lot smarter than you. He's supposed to have one of the best brains the factory can make."

"Ha!" cackled Pirate. "They had to trim it. Trimmed off the smart part. Left all the dumb part."

"Oh, no!" Bingo cried. "They wouldn't do *that* to him."

"Oh, but they did," Pirate said smugly. "He's not worth having. Who wants a dumb dog?"

Commander Brown said, "I'm going to call the Inspector at the robot factory and find out about this. If Bolts had his brain trimmed, it could be a very serious matter."

While the commander was on the telephone, Big Butch came clumping in from the kitchen. "Bingo, don't you know you've got that thing turned up too high? We robots got mighty tender circuits. How can that poor puppy dog answer when he gets himself sizzled every time he turns on his receiver?"

"B-but I *had* to get his attention, Butch."

The commander came back from the telephone, shaking his head. "It's true about his brain," he said sadly. "They had to trim it to make it fit. The factory wasn't at all satisfied with him, but they said it was the best they could do. From the way they talk, I'm afraid Bolts isn't worth saving."

Bingo looked sick. "B-but, Pops, we *can't* abandon him!"

"I'd really hate to do it," the commander admitted. "But if Bolts isn't very smart, we can't afford to take him along in the Space Jumper. It

could be very dangerous."

Fortunately for his peace of mind, poor Bolts had no idea that his fate was hanging in the balance. He had enough worries as it was, even though he was not one to fret about the future. Already the burro had led him to higher ground. The mountains were close, and the cactus forest was beginning to thin.

"I'm stopping here," the burro said at last. "I do hate to part with you, but being edible rather limits one's travels. If you'll take my advice, you'll go as far and as fast as you can while you have the opportunity. If you can get high enough in the mountains, the major won't be able to follow you on horseback."

Bolts stood blinking uneasily at what lay in front of him. The ground was sloping steeply upward, rising so high that it seemed to scrape the stars. He hadn't realized that mountains could be so big—and so dark and threatening.

"Sure gonna be lonesome without you," he mumbled.

"Oh, with your personality," the burro assured him, "you're certain to make friends. Just hold your teeth back, and keep your growl down."

Bolts thanked him for his good words and sound advice, then gave himself a little shake to stiffen his courage, and set out for the unknown dangers ahead.

It soon occurred to him that he'd forgotten to ask the burro what country this was, but he decided it didn't matter. All that mattered was to get out of it as soon as possible—and the only way to do that was to keep moving. If a dog kept moving long enough, he was bound to reach Battleship Lane.

4
He Is Partially Located

Far away on Battleship Lane, the fate of Bolts was still being decided. "I don't like to abandon him," Commander Brown was saying, "but what else can we do? If he won't answer us, we can't find him. And if he's not worth saving anyway—"

"B-but we *need* him!" Bingo cried. "We've *got* to find him! How can we make that space trip without him?"

"We'll have to change our plans," growled the commander. "Even if we found him, I'd hate to be caught in space with a fool robot dog that's got a trimmed brain and a mouth full of stainless-steel teeth!"

"Aw, Pops," poor Bingo wailed, "a little trimming wouldn't hurt his brain. If they trimmed it, they'd just snip off some useless knowledge on the outside. That wouldn't make him dumb!"

"Would too! Would too!" cackled Pirate.

Big Butch glared at the hateful bird. "Button your beak," he muttered threateningly. "Everybody knows you don't like dogs. Honest, Commander, don't you think it's awful unchristian-like to abandon a poor little lost puppy dog that never—"

"Pipe down!" ordered the commander, swallowing hard in spite of himself. "You know I don't *want* to treat a dog that way, even a stupid tin one. And, as you say, Bingo, there's a possibility that a slight brain-trimming wouldn't hurt him too much—though I have my doubts. Anyway, I'm willing to give Bolts a chance—*if* we can locate him."

Bingo almost collapsed with relief. In the next instant he had darted to the radio and his red hair was flashing all around it as he went swiftly to work. "I'm *sure* I can locate him," he said. "This time I'll cut down the power and rig up a direction finder. If he answers at all, we'll have a compass bearing on him. Then we can go hunting for him in the Space Jumper."

Big Butch looked doubtful. "If that poor dog's been sizzled," he began, blinking worriedly at the commander, "he sure won't answer now. There must be another way we can find him. Can't you think of something, sir?"

"There *is* another way," the commander said miserably. "But I've been so upset by all this I can't remember it. You've got a brain, Butch. Start using it!"

"Aye, aye, sir." Big Butch began clumping back and forth,

scratching his metal head. The scratching always helped, for it seemed to loosen his circuits and jiggle his memory banks.

"Oh, stop clumping!" fumed the commander. "How do you expect me to remember anything when you clump?"

"S-sorry, sir." Big Butch stopped and stood blinking his eye lights unhappily. It took both clumping and scratching to jiggle an idea loose in his head. "What we need," he grumbled, "is some special super thought. But I sure don't see any around."

"Super thought?" said Bingo, turning. Suddenly his eyes widened. "Jiminy! I'd forgotten we have the Super-Thought Machine here! Why don't we try it out?"

Before the commander could give him the order, Big Butch had the Super-Thought Machine unpacked and ready for duty. It seemed to be only a simple metal box on the outside, but inside was the most ultra-super-special thinking apparatus the robot factory could make. It had taken Bingo, Big Butch, and the commander all winter to design it.

The moment it was turned on, the Super-Thought Machine began to hum. In a metallic voice it said aloofly, "State your problem. I am capable of solving anything."

"Our problem is a robot dog named Bolts," the commander began. "He has been stolen by persons unknown, who thought they were stealing you. Please locate him."

"I doubt if the creature is worth my consideration," replied the metallic voice, "but as a favor to my designers, I will find him. Describe the dog. Give his serial number, brain rating, battery power, exact time he was stolen, all details of the theft, and the latest weather information."

The commander did so.

"Very elemental," said the Super-Thought Machine. "Ordinarily such a simple problem would be solved in four seconds. But since my circuits are still warming, it will require exactly seventeen minutes and nine seconds. Kindly maintain absolute silence."

Everyone said, "Sh-h-h-h-h!" and stood very still.

At that moment three Navy cars, bristling with guns and guards, roared into the lane. A half dozen worried officers and men sprang out and dashed to the door. Big Butch was forced to open it, and they poured through the house and into the shop.

"Commander," said the officer in charge, "we've just discovered that the new secret Super-Thought Machine was delivered to you by mistake. The Admiral is tearing his hair. He's ordered us to pick it up immediately."

"B-but we're using it!" exclaimed the commander, dismayed. "We—we're trying it out on a problem of great importance."

"Sorry, sir. This is an emergency. There's been more Mongolian

skulduggery, and things are in a ticklish tangle with their space fleet. We have hopes the machine can solve it, but there's not a moment to lose, sir."

In practically no time the Super-Thought Machine was crammed back into its box, rushed out under guard, and the Navy cars were roaring away with it.

Big Butch was so upset that he had to be turned off before he blew a fuse. For long minutes the commander raged while Bingo sat biting his knuckles.

When everyone had calmed and cooled a bit, Bingo turned Big Butch on again. "I'll bet it was the Mongolians that stole Bolts," he said. "It just *had* to be. And I'll bet they think he's the Super-Thought Machine in disguise. If he's escaped, they'll never stop till they catch him."

The commander was more upset than ever. "Great guns, if the Mongolians are behind this, it becomes a Navy matter. Why, Bolts may have learned the secret of the Mongolian spy organization. Get busy on that radio, son. That dog *must* be found."

Big Butch said, "B-but suppose he's in Mongolia?"

"He's not there! He's not there!" cackled Pirate.

"Can't you tell us where he is?" begged the commander.

"Not tonight," replied the infuriating parrot. "It's long past my bedtime." He tucked his head under his wing and pretended to go to sleep.

At the radio, Bingo was repeating over and over, "Bingo calling Bolts! Bingo calling Bolts! Please answer, Bolts!" …

Bolts didn't answer because he was very carefully keeping his tail down as he climbed the mountain. He was in a terrifying up-and-down region that grew steadily worse the higher he climbed. There were boulders bigger than houses that he had to scramble around, not to speak of sudden cliffs and ledges that had to be avoided, and great black ravines that seemed to have no bottom. In the dark, it was no place at all for a dog to take chances, especially a tin dog with a scorpion in his tail.

But in spite of his watchfulness, he almost went tumbling when his feet slipped once on a rock. Instantly his tail shot up as he fought to keep his balance. There was a moment of pure horror when he was sure the scorpion was going to sizzle him again. Instead, there was only a faint buzzing, and just before his tail jerked down he heard a voice, as clear as anything, say: "… calling Bolts!"

He was so astounded his teeth snapped out accidentally and he almost cut loose with his Number Two growl.

Bolts looked fearfully around, blinking his eye lights. Seeing no one, he slid his teeth back in place and tried his sniffer. He discovered

some interesting smells ahead, but the critters they belonged to were too far away to have spoken. Anyway, how would they know his name?

"Hey!" he demanded loudly. "Who's that calling me? Come out and show yourself!"

The only reply was the faint moaning of the mountain wind.

"By Joe," he muttered, "this is *mighty* mysterious."

He shivered suddenly, though not from cold. That moaning wind had a real ghosty sound, and it occurred to him that the voice he had heard might easily have come from a mountain ghost.

The very thought sent a prickling through his circuits. The idea of mountain lions was worrisome enough, but if there were mountain ghosts around, his predicament was ten times as bad. Suppose one got into his circuits and started to sizzle him?

"I'd better find me a safe hole for the night," he told himself. "I'm too wore out to tangle with mountain ghosts."

The shallow cave he presently found wasn't at all to his liking, but it was the best that a tired dog with a weak battery could do. What with all his running, growling, fighting, and climbing, he'd used up a fearful amount of energy. Now it was time to recharge.

He took a final uneasy look around, hoped that neither lions nor ghosts would notice him here, then curled into a tight ball in the corner of the cave. Instantly his circuits clicked off and he was sound asleep.

On distant Battleship Lane, a despairing Bingo stayed by the radio until his voice grew hoarse, then the commander took over. Butch relieved the commander at midnight, and continued to call until it was time to put on his chefs cap and fix breakfast.

"I'm afraid we've lost him," the big robot said sadly, when Bingo relieved him. "Didn't get a peep out of him all night."

"We've got to keep trying," Bingo said stubbornly. "His radio switch is in his tail. He's bound to raise it some time and hear us."

Bolts was just beginning to twitch and stir as Bingo began calling him again. Ordinarily, a recharged robot pops up with his eye lights blinking, wide awake on the instant. But Bolts, having a trimmed brain, not only had taken longer than usual to recharge, but now he was dreaming—something no other robot could possibly do. He was dreaming that his trials were over and that he was safely home on Battleship Lane. It was such a pleasant dream that he was doing his best to hang on to it.

Something nudged him.

"Go way," he mumbled. "Can't you let a feller snooze?"

The something purred and nudged him again.

Bolts stirred and stretched. He blinked one eye light, then the other.

His sniffer had already told him there was nothing to be alarmed about. It was only a cat, and cats were fine critters. This one had a wonderful purr.

He was a little surprised, however, to see the size of the playful paw that had awakened him. It belonged to about the biggest cat critter he could imagine.

"By Joe!" he exclaimed, crawling out of his corner and rotating his sniffer. "Didn't know they had king-size kitties like *you* in the mountains!"

"I'm not exactly a kitty. They call me a lion."

"Aw, don't hand me that. You may be king-size, but you look like a cat, you smell like a cat, and you purr like one. If you're not a cat critter, then I'm not a tin dawg."

"Have it your own way," the cat critter told him. "But I never heard of a dog that ticks and talks. If you're a dog, why aren't you barking at me? Can't you bark and growl?"

"Oh, brother!" said Bolts, rolling his eye lights. "Don't get me started. I got a growl to end all growls. The thing is, I *like* cats. I been conditioned to 'em, see? As for talking to you, seems I can talk to any kinda critter. It's my trimmed-off brain." He explained about himself and his shortcomings.

The cat critter purred again. "Oh, we all have our faults," he said.

“But you sound like a fine fellow in spite of yours. We should have fun hunting together. Would you like to try it?”

“Eh? Hunting?” Bolts stared at him, then said uneasily, “W-what d’you hunt?”

“Lots of things. This morning I was thinking of going down the mountain and hunting burros for a change. Young burros are quite delectable. Ever try one?”

“Ulp!” muttered Bolts, suddenly realizing that the king-size cat critter really was a mountain lion. The truth rather stunned him. This was where an ignorant tin dog had to be mighty diplomatic.

“I can’t go hunting,” he explained, “because I’m being hunted myself. That Lumpy Lopez is after me.”

“But he’s downright dangerous!”

“You’re telling me! And with him are Comrade Pang and Major Mangler. They chased me for miles last night. When I gave Lumpy’s dawgs a going-over, they stopped for reinforcements. Now they’re coming after me with a whole dratted army of dawgs and men. I believe I hear ’em, so I’d better scram.”

“We’d both better scramble,” grumbled the mountain lion. “I’ll take you where they can’t follow. Let’s go.”

They began hurrying upward on a winding trail. “What I can’t understand,” said the mountain lion, “is why anyone would chase you. I wouldn’t say you were delectable.”

“I ain’t,” Bolts said thankfully. “But I’m valuable.”

“I’d never guess it.”

“Never judge a tin dawg by his hide. I may look like a hunk o’ junk on the outside, but on the inside I could be something else.”

The lion, reaching a ledge, turned to study him curiously. “You mean you’re in disguise?”

“Dunno,” said Bolts, leaping for the ledge. “But there’s a strong possibility that I’m a Super-Thought Machine.”

Just as he spoke the last few words, Bolts landed on the ledge and his tail snapped up. The light on the end of it flashed, a buzzing went through him, and a voice cried, “Bolts! You’re not a Super-Thought Machine! You’re Bolts Brown. Keep your tail up and answer!”

Bolts was too startled to lower his tail. “W-who’s that talking to me?” he stammered, looking wildly around. “I-I don’t see nobody.”

“Bolts, this is Bingo! Keep your tail up!”

“B-Bingo!” gasped Bolts, and began to shake with joy. “W-where are you?”

“I’m speaking to you by radio from Battleship Lane. Don’t you know you have a built-in radio of your own? Your tail controls it.”

“By Joe! I thought I had a scorpion in my tail!”

“Well, you haven’t—and you’re not a Super-Thought Machine,

either. What gave you that idea?"

"Never claimed I was something I ain't—but there's some no-good rascals that think I ain't what I am, and it's causing me a heap of trouble. They're after me right now. I hear 'em coming—sounds like a thousand of 'em! Bingo, I gotta scram."

"Don't sign off! Tell us where you are, and we'll come and rescue you."

"Dunno where I am— 'cept I'm on a mountain in a foreign place. Wait'll I catch up with my friend—they're after him too, but mebbe he knows."

"Bolts, we have a direction finder on you, and it's pointing to Mexico. But we can't tell how far down you are. Is your friend a Mexican?"

"Naw. He's a king-size cat critter—claims he's a mountain lion."

"Bolts! Good grief, have you lost your marbles?"

"Never had none to lose. Bingo, they're hot after me, and I gotta move—but I can't move fast when my tail is up. I'll call you later!"

Bolts could hear the rising sounds of pursuit below him on the mountain. There seemed to be hundreds and hundreds of dogs and men. Suddenly wishing he'd been given wings instead of feet, he began racing after the mountain lion.

5
He Finds a Deep Hole

Breakfast had been forgotten on Battleship Lane. Everyone was standing by the radio, waiting for Bolts to speak again. Bingo was tugging dazedly at his shock of red hair, and the commander was shaking his head. Even Claws, the cat, was looking doubtful. Poor Bolts, they thought. Imagining he could talk to animals!

Pirate cackled, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! He's off his rocker! He's off his rocker! He's off his rocker!"

"Shaddup!" growled Big Butch. "So he's lost his marbles—d'you wanna lose some feathers?"

"It's bad enough to find him so uncouth and ignorant," muttered the commander. "But on top of it he's addled—and undoubtedly aberrated. Bingo, you couldn't possibly want a dog like that!"

Bingo swallowed. "B-but, Pops, maybe he's just sort of confused because of the trouble he's in. Anyhow, he's my dog, and he needs help. He—" Bingo stopped. Bolts was speaking again.

"Bolts calling Bingo! Are you listening, Bingo?"

"Go ahead, Bolts! Are you safe now?"

"Naw, but I've reached a spot where I can hold my tail up and still run. I asked my friend where we are, but being a cat critter he thought it was a foolish question. He says it's more important to be somewhere else."

"Bolts," said Bingo, "don't you know you can't talk to animals?"

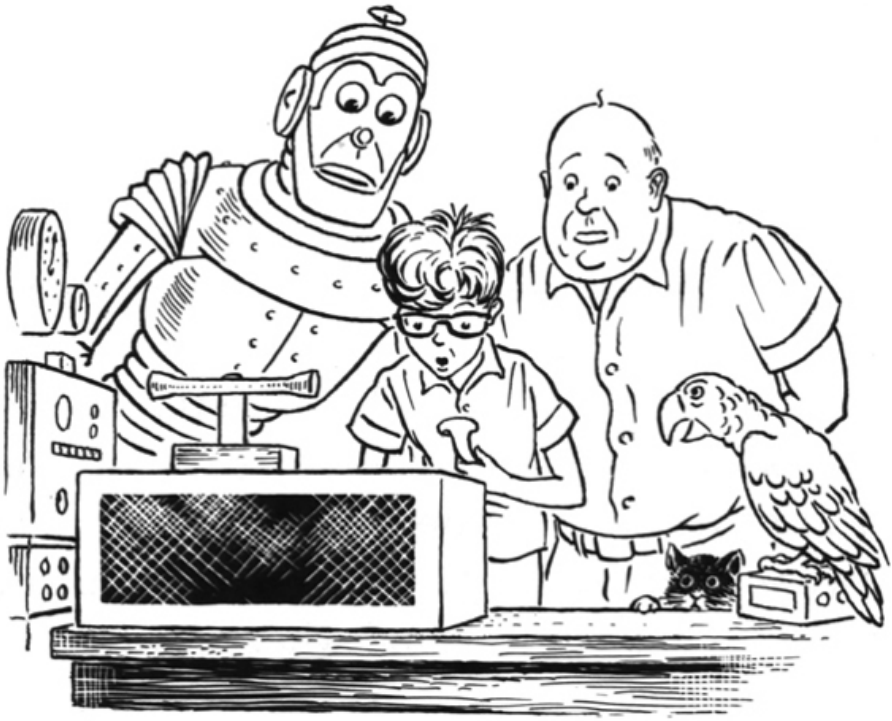
"You mean there's a law against it?"

"Of course not!" Bingo said despairingly. "I only wish you could talk to them. But such a thing is impossible."

"Well, I'm mighty glad I didn't know it was impossible, 'cause I sure been doing it! It's my trimmed-off brain, Bingo. It's tender around the edges, see? Makes me mighty receptive."

Bingo clenched his hands. "Bolts, are you telling me the honest-to-goodness truth?"

"Aw, Bingo, you oughta know I wouldn't hand you no tripe! Sure, I got shortchanged here and there—I'm awful ignorant—but that don't make me a stupe. I know which way is up. And if I hadn't been able to yak with every critter I've met, I wouldn't be ticking and talking to you now."



Bingo drew a deep breath of relief, then said quickly, “O.K., that’s good enough for me! Now listen carefully. You’re somewhere in Mexico, but we don’t know where. We’re flying down immediately to look for you, but the only way we can locate you is with the direction finder. So keep signaling. Understand?”

“I gotcha. What kind of a crate are you coming in?”

“It’s not a crate,” said Bingo, scandalized. “It’s called a Space Jumper, and it’s very super-special. It looks like a silver balloon, only it’s not. It’s the fastest thing that flies, so we’ll be there in practically no time.”

“Won’t be too soon for me! Things are getting rough.”

The moment Bolts signed off, Commander Brown gasped, “I just can’t believe it—a robot dog that can talk to animals! He may be uncouth, but he’s worth triple his weight in gold!” In the next breath he was bawling orders, snatching up equipment, and hurrying, panting and wheezing, for the Space Jumper.

Pirate flew behind him, cackling, “All hands aboard! On the double!”

Bingo unhooked the direction finder while Big Butch went thumping through the kitchen, raking this and that into a basket so the commander wouldn’t starve before they returned.

The Space Jumper, disguised as an ordinary water tank to fool foreign agents, was perched on its supports behind the shop. There

was an air lock in the bottom section, a band of concealed viewing ports around the main cabin in the middle, and a zippy little cosmic ray motor under the cabin table. It could really zip when Bingo pressed the right buttons, and it could eat up space as if it were nothing. This was fortunate, for it was very crowded with the commander aboard, and no one liked to stay in it too long at a time.

The commander managed to squeeze through the air lock hatches without getting stuck, and the others followed.

"Secure the hatches," he ordered. "Stations. Activate the generators. Release the port covers, and stand by to cast off. Lively!"

"All hands at stations!" Pirate cackled, and for a minute everyone was busy.

"The hatches are secured, sir, and all ports are clear," Big Butch announced.

"The generators are activated, sir," Bingo said, as power hissed through tubes, and dials and buttons began to glow.

"Cast off!" bellowed the commander, in his best shipboard voice.

Bingo, seated at the button panel, pressed the first button in the top row. Instantly the Space Jumper was floating gently above its supports, and everyone in it was floating gently also, for the cosmic power was nullifying gravity as soap nullifies dirt. Bingo, who weighed little enough, didn't care for it, but the commander dearly loved it. It made him feel like a bit of thistledown.

"Off and floating free, sir," Bingo said.

"Up to a hundred miles. Easy does it."

"Easy does it, sir," said Bingo, and carefully pressed more buttons.

The Space Jumper slid upward like an elevator, giving everyone except Big Butch an umpity feeling in his stomach for the first mile or two. Being a spaceship, it had to rise above the atmosphere before it could begin to zip, for it moved so fast at its slowest zip speed that friction could turn it into a cinder in half a wink.

"Altitude one hundred!" Bingo announced.

"Course two twenty-five degrees, dead slow on zip for five seconds. Then give it reverse zip, and look sharp!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Bingo set a compass dial, pressed a button in the second row, counted five, then pressed another. This was the ticklish part. Though they seemed to be standing still, the earth spun under them and in less than five seconds they were over Mexico. Before the reverse zip could take effect they were over the Pacific Ocean.

At this point the commander, realizing he had made a slight mistake in navigation, ran completely out of orders and suddenly remembered he hadn't had his breakfast. "Ah, me," he muttered weakly, "I can't do another thing without food, and I've been so worried about Bolts I

entirely forgot—"

"Your breakfast is right here, sir," Big Butch said quickly, taking a plate from the basket he had brought. On it were a dozen griddle cakes floating in butter and honey. Bingo had to press a button quickly and add some gravity so the honey wouldn't ooze away.

"Bless your tin bones," the commander said thankfully, and added to Bingo, "take over, son."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

It was a relief to Bingo to pilot the Space Jumper alone, for it was really quite simple when the commander wasn't giving orders. It was much like using a typewriter, which he could handle blindfolded. In a few seconds they were back over Mexico, and dimly in the distance below them was a great range of mountains—possibly the very mountains where Bolts was running for his life.

"See if you can raise him on the radio," Bingo told Butch.

The big robot had already rigged the direction finder, and now he sang out, "Butch calling Bolts! Butch calling Bolts! Come in, please!"

There was no answer.

Big Butch tried it again, then called in alarm, "Hey, Bolts! Where are you? We've come to rescue you! Give us a signal!"

Poor Bolts, at that moment, couldn't have answered if his life had depended upon it. A great deal had happened in the few minutes since he had last talked to Bingo, and none of it was pleasant.

Had he known more about mountains and mountain lions, he might have saved himself more trouble than he dreamed existed. But how was an ignorant tin dog to guess that mountains are full of traps, and cat critters full of tricks?

They had reached a high valley with a deep ravine on the right, when Bolts heard alarming sounds ahead. He was dismayed to see a large pack of dogs pouring through a gap in the ridge directly in front of him. Behind the dogs were many men on horses.

The lion whirled about. Bolts followed, wondering how his pursuers had managed to cut them off. Then he realized that these horsemen belonged to a different group. Major Mangler must have divided his men and sent them to cover every gap in the mountains.

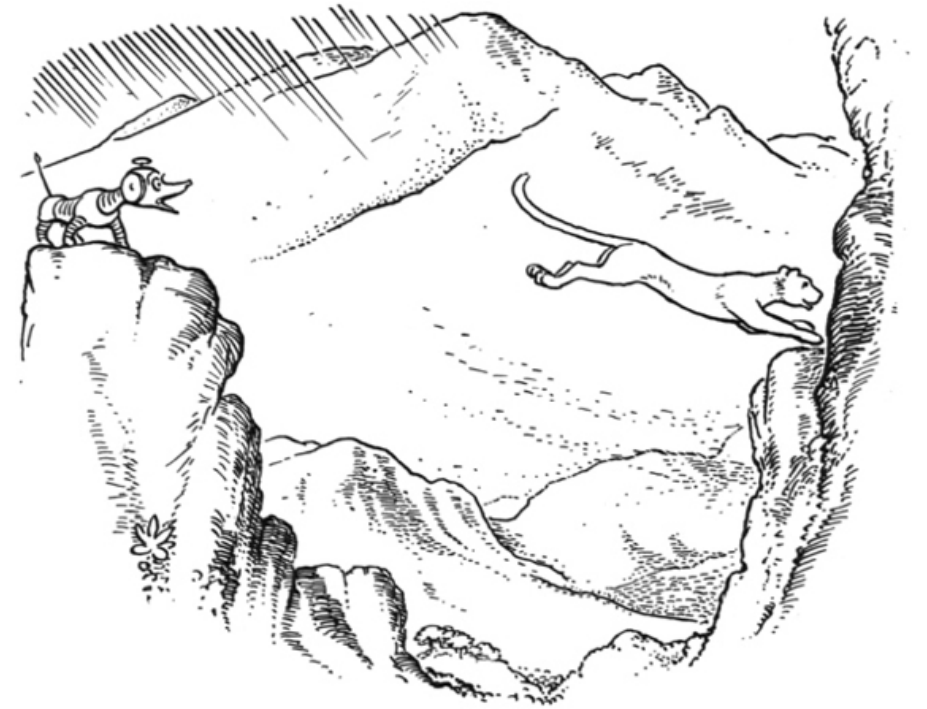
"Say, we're in a pickle," Bolts gasped. "What are we going to do?"

"Figure it out for yourself," replied the mountain lion. "I know what *I* am going to do. It's evident that you're a very unsafe fellow to travel with, so I'm leaving. Goodby, and good luck!"

With that, the mountain lion bounded to the edge of the ravine, gave a tremendous leap that carried him over the yawning space, and vanished among the rocks on the other side. Only a bird could have followed him.

Bolts was so astounded by the leap and so upset at being abandoned

in such a spot that he could hardly pull his wits together. Then a shout went up, and he was aware of the dog pack racing toward him with eager yelps.



"Oh, woe is me!" he muttered forlornly as he went scrambling around the slope. "I should have done my own thinking instead of depending on a cat critter. Now I got enemies in front, enemies behind, and there's nowhere to go but up—and I ain't got wings. If I can't find a real hole to crawl into, I'm a gone dawg for sure."

There just *had* to be a hole somewhere. If he didn't find a hole in a hurry, he'd have to use his Number Three growl again, and somehow it didn't seem that Number Three would help him much here. There were too many enemies, and it would probably wreck his battery to frighten them all.

Was that a hole between those rocks? Glory be, it was!

Bolts darted into it. At the moment it seemed like the most heavenly hole in the world, for it was narrow and winding and deep. The men couldn't possibly reach him here, even with poles, and only one dog at a time could follow. What could be more perfect?

When Bolts figured he was in deep enough, he turned around so he could face the first of his attackers. Turning wasn't at all easy, for his hole was so narrow he had to twist and squirm and nearly tie himself into a knot to manage it.

Safe at last, and ready for business, he remembered that he had better call Bingo. So much had happened that it seemed like hours since he'd last talked to Bingo, but when he checked his built-in clock —which he'd almost forgotten—he was surprised to discover that only a few minutes had passed.

"By Joe," he muttered, "time sure is a funny thing. Seems like the more trouble you have, the slower it passes. Kinda hate to tell Bingo I'm bottled in a spot like this, but maybe he can figger what to do. Be mighty nice to hear his voice again."

Quivering with expectation, Bolts tried to raise his tail and turn on his radio.

It was impossible.

He twisted, squirmed, wiggled, and turned, but there simply wasn't room in the narrow hole to get his tail in the right position. This was a most unsettling discovery, and poor Bolts felt so thwarted he would have welcomed a tangle with the dog pack just to ease his mind.

But even this was denied him. He could hear muffled voices coming from the entrance to the hole. "Keep those dogs away. Don't you know that monster can tear them to bits in there? Bring picks and shovels. And if we can't dig him out, we'll blast him out. He's got to be destroyed."

6
He Goes Spelunking

High up in the Space Jumper, Big Butch was hovering over the radio with growing concern. “Butch calling Bolts!” he repeated. “Butch calling Bolts! We’ve come to rescue you! Please answer!”

Finally he shook his head. “Something’s sure gone wrong,” he said dolefully.

“He seemed very hard pressed the last time he spoke,” said the commander. “I’m awfully afraid he’s been captured—or worse …”

“Poor little puppy dog,” muttered Butch.

Bingo sat biting his knuckles. Suddenly he looked at the parrot. “What’s happened, Pirate?” he begged. “Bolts isn’t d-dead, is he?”

“Ha!” the jealous parrot cackled happily. “He might as well be dead. He’s deep in the ground where he belongs, and good riddance!”

“Pirate!” snapped the commander. “That’s no way to talk about a new member of the family. Bolts may be ignorant and uncouth, but he’s just as much a member of the Brown family as you are, and that practically makes him your brother.”

“Sorry relation,” grumbled the parrot. “But if you want him, you can have him—if you can get him. He’s crawled into a hole.”

“That’s it!” Bingo cried. “He’s crawled into a narrow hole where he can’t use his radio. What direction is it from here, Pirate?”

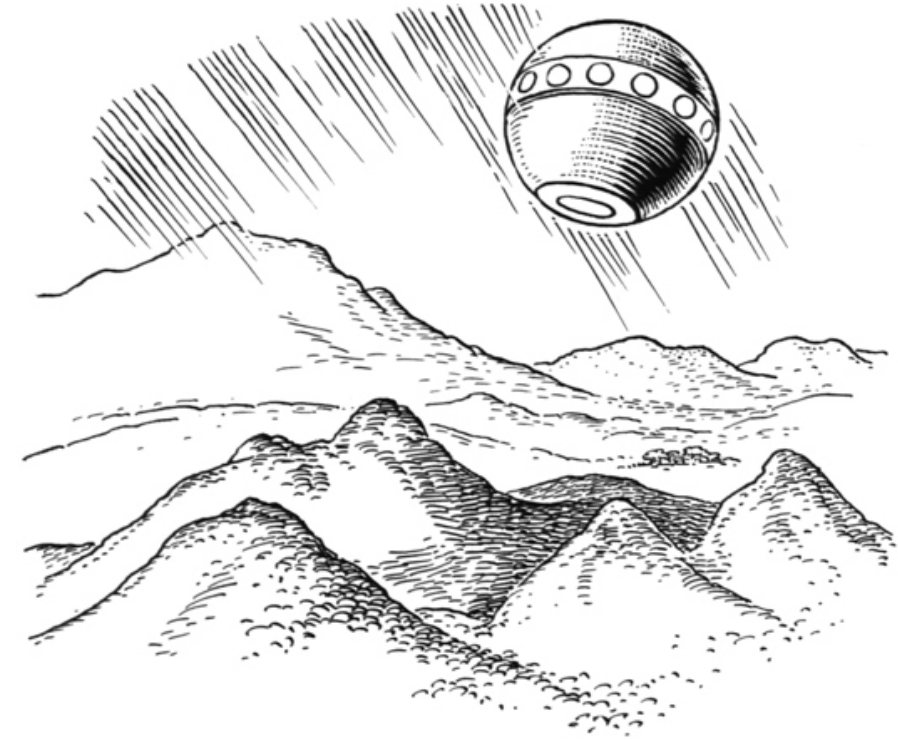
“Sou’east by south,” Pirate admitted reluctantly.

“How far?”

“Three hundred and nine and a quarter miles—and that’s all I’m telling you. You’ve strained my second sight to the breaking point!”

Bingo’s fingers flew over the control buttons. The earth seemed to shift, and below them a new range of mountains appeared. Now Bingo pressed the down button, and the Space Jumper, like a falling elevator, began to descend through the atmosphere. Everyone except Big Butch felt an oopity feeling in his stomach, which is the opposite of the umpity feeling of going up.

A half mile above the mountains, Bingo halted the Space Jumper and everyone peered down through the viewing ports. There were wild and barren ridges below them, some topped with snow, but at this height neither Bingo nor the commander could make out details. Big Butch, however, had built-in super vision, and could spot a beetle at a thousand yards.



"See anything?" Bingo asked.

"Not a soul," Big Butch answered. "If that poor little dog was being chased, there'd be men around. Your navigation must be off."

"Jiminy!" Bingo exclaimed. "I'll bet Pirate gave me the distance in nautical miles. I was using land miles."

"Lubber!" squawked Pirate. "You'll never be a sailor."

"Aw, we were traveling over land," Bingo said. "So naturally I thought …" His fingers flew over the button panel again, and now an auxiliary jet motor began to drive them forward. It seemed terribly slow after their zip speed in space, but finally new peaks were beneath them, with a desert in the distance.

"There they are!" Big Butch cried. "In that little valley. Men, horses, dogs—lots of them! There's a hole in the rocks, and they're digging in it!"

"Keep your eye on them," the commander ordered. "Quick, Bingo, call Bolts again."

Poor Bolts, half a mile and some spare feet below, was still unable to use his radio. After overhearing Major Mangler's unpleasant plans for him, his main concern was to get as far down in the hole as possible.

He had managed to turn around once more, and squeeze past rocks he couldn't dig out with his paws. Once he wondered how he could

escape from the hole—if that happy chance ever came—then he told himself, “Aw, what’s the diff? I’ll worry about that later.”

His sniffer had already warned him that he was not alone down here. There was some sort of critter ahead—a very cautious and quiet critter that kept retreating as he advanced. He decided he had better get acquainted with it before trouble cut loose on them both.

“Hey, you!” he called. “I don’t know who you are, but we’re in a pickle. How deep does this hole go?”

The critter refused to answer.

Bolts pushed on, then stopped abruptly at a fork in the passage. On his right was only blackness and strange smells his sniffer didn’t care for. But in the dimness on his left he made out a pair of shrewd, beady eyes in a sharp-pointed face. The eyes were studying him intently.

“By Joe,” Bolts muttered, “ain’t you a fox critter?”

“I admit to nothing,” replied the fox critter. “Especially to a metal doglike thing that ticks and talks. Explain yourself.”

“Ain’t got time to explain,” Bolts told him. “Can’t you hear the racket outside?”

“I’m unpleasantly aware of it—and it doesn’t inspire me with confidence in you. What’s going on?”

“That’s Major Mangler and his men, and they’re hard after me,” Bolts said hurriedly. “When they find they can’t dig me out, they’re aiming to blow me out. We gotta scram—if there’s a deeper place to scram to. What’s over on your side?”

"Bats and darkness. And all of it unhealthy."

Bolts shivered. "How 'bout this other direction?"

"The same, only more of it."

"That don't sound so good."

"It isn't at all good, except that it's deeper. Being the greater of two evils, I'd hardly recommend it—but since the situation is desperate, I'd suggest you take it."

"After you," Bolts said nervously. "And we'd better hurry—time's running out on us."

"Can you see in the dark?" inquired the fox critter.

"I—I'm supposed to have special night sight," Bolts admitted.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"B-but I'm kinda inexperienced in places like this," poor Bolts protested. "Why don't you go first, and let me follow?"

"Oh, but that would be most unwise. Beyond this point there is utter and complete darkness. In such a place, good vision should always lead, and good advice should always follow. It makes for safety as well as speed."

Bolts would have preferred to have his good advice ahead of him, but at that moment Major Mangler—who had decided that picks and shovels were useless—set off his first blast. The explosion rocked the hole and sent Bolts tumbling into the blackness.

Bolts slid over a hundred feet downward, mainly on his sniffer,

before he fetched up with a mighty jolt against a rock. If his sniffer hadn't been made of the very best stainless steel—as was most of him, in fact—his sniffing days would have been over. Even so, he was so badly shaken that he skipped several ticks before his jangled circuits cleared.

"Keep going!" the fox critter urged. "It's caved in behind us! Do you want the next blast to bury us?"

Bolts went slipping and sliding on downward. Several hundred feet later he reached a level spot and stood blinking his eye lights unhappily. Going back was forever impossible—but going forward seemed quite unthinkable.

His night vision showed a monstrous cavern opening ahead. The place curved away in all directions into the darkest dark imaginable. It took no imagination whatever to fill the impenetrable black distance with the most horrible of dangers.

Bolts rotated his sniffer, then wished he hadn't. "What's that I smell?" he asked fearfully.

"I'd advise you not to question it," replied the fox critter, staying carefully behind him.

"B-but it smells dangerous! I gotta know what it is."

"You asked for it, brother. Didn't you ever face the Terrible Unknown before? It has the most dangerous of all smells."

"Ulp! I'll confess I ain't been around much. W-what's it like?"

"One never knows. That's the awful part about it. Anything unknown is always terrible until you tangle with it. I'd advise you to proceed, for delay always makes it worse."

"We can't go back, so I reckon it's gotta be done," Bolts mumbled. "But I ain't tangling with nothing till I scare it down to size."

Without the least suspicion of what its effect might be, he opened his mouth and loosened his Number Two growl.

A thunderous echo roared back at him, and for an instant poor Bolts thought he had made a ghastly mistake and loosened his unspeakable Number Three. Had that happened, it is almost certain that the mountain would have caved in upon him. As it was, the mountain only seemed to cave in. Bolts flattened in his tracks and pressed his flexible paws over his hearing plates, trying to shut out the terrible roaring.

The echoes died away at last, and now all he could hear were the squeaks of frightened bats. Quite shaken by his experience, Bolts got to his feet and looked around.

The fox critter had vanished.

"Guess he's kinda high-strung," Bolts muttered, just loud enough to hear himself talk. "Sure hope I didn't *un*string him, 'cause this ain't no place to be alone in."

He gave himself a little shake to stiffen his courage. His tail snapped up, and he heard Bingo's voice again.

"Bolts, please answer!" Bingo was saying despairingly. "Oh, please, please answer!"

Bolts gave a yelp of pure joy that sent echoes rumbling. Instantly he lowered his voice and said, "I'm right here, Bingo! Tried to call you before, but couldn't. Sure been in a squeeze."

"Hot diggity!" Bingo cried happily. "I thought we'd lost you for good. Why is your voice so low? Are you hurt?"

"Naw, just kinda cautious. I'm in an awful cave sort of place, and every time I get loud the roof gets wobbly. Where are you?"

"We've come to rescue you in the Space Jumper, and we're a half mile above the spot where you went underground. We saw the blast and were worried sick about you. There are men all over the place. They're clearing out the hole and getting ready to blast again."

"Let 'em blast. A jet-powered mole couldn't reach me now. How'd you locate me?"

"Pirate told us. He's the commander's parrot. He's got second sight."

"Tell him he's a mighty fine bird. Wish he could figger some way to get me out of here."

"Maybe he can. Here's Pops—he wants to talk to you."

"Bolts," said a new voice, "this is Commander Brown. Can you tell us how far down you are?"

"Plenty far, Commander. A hop and a skip from China, seems like."

"How big is the place you're in?"

"It ain't little. You could mighty near stuff a mountain in it."

"Are there bats around?"

"Billions of 'em."

"Can you hear water running?"

"Ain't heard none yet."

"H'mm. Your speech is disgraceful, Bolts. If we ever get you out of there, you've got to mend your ways and learn to be a proper robot—if that's possible. Now listen to me carefully. You've become a spelunker, and you've got to use your head. Understand?"

"W-what's a spelunker?"

"My, but they've trimmed your brain close," grumbled the commander. "I'm beginning to have more doubts about you. A spelunker is a cave explorer. You've got to explore that cave and locate running water. There's a possibility it can lead you to another entrance. If that fails, watch the bats. They'll fly out at sundown to hunt for food. Got that straight?"

"Yup, I got it."

"Don't say yup to me! Say 'Aye, aye, sir!'"

"Aw, Commander, I'm only a tin dawg!"

“That’s no excuse—and you’re not tin! You are made of the very finest stainless steel, and I hate to see it wasted on a—a—” The commander stopped, at a complete loss for words. Then he snapped, “Bolts, do you know who stole you?”

“Sure do! A couple no-good throat-cutting varmints named Comrade Pang and Major Mangler.” Bolts described them carefully, and in very uncomplimentary language. “They got a feller named Lumpy Lopez working for ’em, and I’ve heard it said they’re all in the pay of the Mongolians.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed the commander. “Can you tell me where their headquarters is located?”

“If you’re high up, Commander, you oughta be able to see their hangout. It’s a bunch of little mud buildings over on the edge of a desertlike place. There’s a cactus forest this side of it.”

“We see it! Good work, Bolts! I’m calling the Mexican Air Patrol immediately. Maybe they can capture all those rascals. Here’s Bingo again.”

“Bolts,” Bingo said hurriedly, “find water and follow it down as fast as you can. We’ve got to get you out soon because you’re needed on a space trip. It’s terribly important.”

“By Joe, a space trip! Where you aiming to go, Bingo?”

“Tell you later. Pops wants to use the radio to call the Air Patrol.”

7
He Walks Underwater

For a minute after Bingo signed off, Bolts stood blinking his eye lights happily, his predicament entirely forgotten. A space trip! He knew he'd been designed for a special purpose, and that space had something to do with it, but he hadn't realized how much Bingo was counting on him.

"By Joe!" he told himself. "Mebbe I got shortchanged at the factory, but it looks like I'm going to be a mighty important dawg after all."

Maybe he'd turn out to be a real VID—a Very Important Dog. That is, if he ever got out of here. This last thought brought him back to unpleasant reality. He shook himself again, wishing he had a little more built-in gumption, and took a few hesitant steps forward while he studied the blackness.

In spite of his growl, the blackness hadn't improved a bit. If anything, it looked much worse, now that he was alone.

Then he rotated his sniffer, and instantly became aware of a familiar presence. Considerably relieved, Bolts turned and saw a pair of beady eyes glaring at him from under a shelf of rock.

"Hey, whatcha hiding from?" he asked.

"Consequences," the fox critter answered sourly. "You'll live longer if you learn to avoid them. I'm all in favor of taming the dark—but why pull the roof down on us?"

"Didn't aim to. It's still up there, so you'd better come out. We got some exploring to do."

"Not—so—fast," said the fox critter. "I've been forced to take you on faith—but faith has its limits. Anything that ticks is questionable—but when it talks it better be ready with some answers."

"Aw, I tick because I'm factory-built," said Bolts, and explained about his trimmed brain. "Reckon I could talk to any kind of a critter—even a bat. That satisfy you?"

"Hardly. Were you talking to bats just now?"

"Now lissen," Bolts snapped, "the situation's bad, but it ain't *that* bad. I got folks, see? Mighty important people, and they gave me a built-in radio. Can't I keep in touch with 'em without you getting into a tizzy?"

"I'm not in a tizzy," said the fox critter, easing from his hiding place. "But I've learned that prudence pays. I value my hide, and I'd

like to get it out of here. Did your folks happen to suggest how that little matter could be arranged?"

"Yup," Bolts admitted. "They said to hunt for running water."

"Well, you'll never find it standing here."

"Then lead on," said Bolts, blinking unhappily at the blackness. "It's your turn."

"Oh, no. You're the one with night vision. Besides, you got us into this pickle—so you should get us out."

"Pshaw!" Bolts grumbled. "Who's afraid of the dark?"

He began moving cautiously forward, following his sniffer. There was bound to be water somewhere ahead, and if he followed his sniffer long enough, he couldn't possibly miss it.

Time passed. For Bolts, where every dark and uncertain minute seemed endless, it positively dragged. But up in the Space Jumper, time—which had been dawdling—suddenly began to speed up, and

presently it was rushing along at a great rate. Soon there was so much excitement that poor Bolts was momentarily forgotten.

The Mexican Air Patrol had not been overcome with enthusiasm when Commander Brown first called them on the radio. “Bandits, did you say?” purred the officer in charge. “And they’re after your dog? Dear me, Commander, you have my sympathy, but—”

“I don’t want your sympathy!” bellowed the commander. “I want your help! I’m trying to tell you this is a very special dog—and these bandits are more than bandits. They are spies. They are working for the Mongolians. The ringleaders are Major Mangler and Comrade Pang. They—”

“Major Mangler!” exclaimed the officer. “Why didn’t you tell me that in the first place? There are rewards in nine countries for that rascal! Commander, what percentage of the reward money do you want?”

“I don’t want any of it! Just get here fast, and you can capture the whole gang.”

“Coming—*¡muy pronto*!”

So it was that a swarm of helicopters loaded with guardsmen suddenly appeared over the mountains. As they landed in the valley, Bingo, eyes popping, eased the Space Jumper lower for a better look. There was a great to-do below, with men rushing this way and that, falling in tangles, scrambling out of tangles, and raising clouds of dust through which horses and dogs raced madly.

The dust was just clearing a bit when Bingo was startled to hear Bolts on the radio. “We’ve found flowing water, Bingo—but I still don’t see no way out.”

“Which way is it flowing?” Bingo asked.

“Aw, how would I know? What’s the diff? It’s all the same down here.”

“It makes a lot of difference!” Bingo cried. “If you’ll tell us the direction, we’ll head that way in the Space Jumper and search for an outlet. The Air Patrol has come and they’ve captured that gang. Now we can land safely and hunt for you.”

“That’s great news, Bingo—but I’m kinda shy on directions. The sun ain’t exactly shining down here.”

“Bolts, you’ve got a built-in compass! Use it!”

There was a silence, then Bolts muttered, “By Joe, I wondered what that little gadget was that kept jiggling in me. Bingo, this water winds about, but it seems to be flowing mainly northwest.”

“B-but that would take us way over on the other side of the mountain! You must be wrong.”

“Nope. My gadget says northwest, Bingo.”

“Then you’ll just have to keep going. We’ll cross over and see what

we can find."

While Bolts plodded on in the darkness, Bingo's fingers flew over the control buttons, and the Space Jumper rose and sped to the opposite side of the mountain.

Big Butch, on watch at a port, suddenly pointed and said, "Look at that deep canyon! There's a stream in the bottom of it. D'you suppose it's the one Bolts is following?"

"We'd better investigate it," said the commander. "Take us down, Bingo."

The canyon was so deep and narrow that Bingo had to use all his skill to ease the Space Jumper into it and bring it safely to the bottom. He stopped it a few feet above the canyon floor, and Big Butch opened the hatches and dropped an anchor.

Everyone crawled out, including Claws, the cat, who had been asleep under a bunk all the time.

Bingo looked worriedly around. There was no cave entrance in sight. If one was to be found, it would obviously have to be found on foot, for the canyon was much too narrow to explore in the Space Jumper. It was also obvious that the commander wasn't going to be of much help, for it was hours past his lunchtime, and there wasn't a scrap left to eat. The commander, Bingo saw, was sagging like a starved jellyfish.

"Pops," he said, "why don't you let Butch take you home and fix you a snack? I can stay here and be looking for Bolts."

The commander brightened at the thought of food, but he said uncertainly, "I don't like leaving you here all alone, Bingo. This is one of the wildest parts of Mexico. If anything happened—"

"Aw, what could happen?" Bingo protested. "There's no danger, now that that gang's been captured. And you'll be back in no time in the Space Jumper. What do you say, Pirate?"

"I say it will be a rewarding experience," cackled the parrot.

That settled it. Bingo strapped on a wrist radio, and Butch, Pirate, and the commander crawled back aboard. It wasn't until the Space Jumper was out of sight above the canyon that Bingo remembered Claws, the cat. When he looked around, he discovered that Claws had vanished.

"Hey, Claws!" Bingo cried out.

Instantly the narrow canyon roared with thundering echoes: "CLAWS! CLAWS! CLAWS!"

Bingo stood shaken till the echoes died, then he saw Claws's small footprints in the fine sand that covered most of the canyon floor. The footprints led downstream—in exactly the opposite direction from where he wanted to begin his search.

"Crazy cat!" he grumbled, and began running downstream as fast as

he could follow the trail. In spite of what Pirate had said, he had an awful feeling that Claws's curiosity was going to get them both in trouble.

Bingo rounded a curve in the canyon wall, and stopped in astonishment. A large cave opened on his left. From it a tiny stream flowed down to join the slightly larger stream in the canyon. Bingo dashed inside, following Claws's footprints.

Again he stopped, his eyes widening. Claws was not in sight. But over on one side were cots, blankets, boxes of provisions, camping equipment, and a large radio on a crate. Filling the dimness beyond was a deep pool of water from which ran the tiny stream.

Whose cave was this?

Suddenly uneasy, Bingo thought of Bolts, and turned on his wrist radio.

"Bolts!" he called. "Where are you? Please come in!"

Poor Bolts couldn't hear him, for he was in a ticklish pickle, and needed his tail for a balance. He was clinging to a slippery rock that threatened to send him tumbling at any moment, and it was positively the last foothold in the cavern. The way of escape was in sight—but reaching it seemed forever impossible.

Behind him the fox critter was saying crossly, "What's the matter with you? Go on! Go on!"

"Can't!" Bolts said despairingly. "Ain't you got eyes? There's nothing ahead but water! We've come to the end of the line."

The trickle they had been following had widened and deepened. Behind them lay several large pools that they had passed with difficulty, for the cavern had been narrowing as the water widened, leaving little room to stand. Now there was no place left to stand, and in front of them stretched the largest pool of all.

On the far side of it gleamed a pale narrow streak of daylight.

"Start swimming!" snapped the fox critter. "Any fool can swim if he has to!"

"Then I reckon I ain't a fool—and I sure ain't a fish. I'm a tin dawg, and I'd sink like a stone."

"That's too bad," said the fox critter, quite without feeling. "But this is a hard world, and it's either sink or swim for all of us. Frankly, I've found you very undesirable company, and I'm glad to leave you to the bats."

With that, the fox critter plunged into the pool, swam toward the streak of daylight, and soon vanished in the distance.

Bolts had never felt so hopeless. Then he thought of Bingo, and very carefully eased backward until he could safely raise his tail and turn on his radio.

"Oh, Bingo! Bingo!" he called forlornly. "Can you hear me?"

“I hear you!” came Bingo’s happy voice. “Where are you now?”

“At the end of the line. I can see daylight ahead, but it’s all water between here and there. And since I ain’t a fish or a fox critter—”

“Did you say fox?” Bingo interrupted.

“Yup. I been traveling with a sharptongued sourpuss of a fox critter, and he’s swum out.”

“Wow!” cried Bingo. “There’s a fox just crawling from the water here. Bolts, you’re closer than I thought! Water won’t hurt you. Shut your mouth, hop in, and start walking.”

“B-but suppose I wet my circuits? Won’t it ruin me?”

“Not if you keep your mouth closed tight. You’re waterproof. Come on!”

Bolts closed his mouth and plunged in. The pool seemed a mile deep, but presently he was pushing his way along the bottom, half walking, half swimming. A startled trout, marooned here, stared at him goggle-eyed, then flashed away in fright. Bolts struggled on as fast as he could move. Naturally, when he was so anxious to meet Bingo, time did more stretching than ever, and he was sure he had been in the water for hours before he reached a shallow spot. Actually it was only a few minutes later when his head came to the surface in the outer cave where Bingo waited, and his sniffer caught the most wonderful boy scent in the world.

“Bingo!” he cried, and leaped out with joyful yips and sprang upon Bingo with his tail wagging. Then, suddenly worried, he said, “Bingo, they shortchanged me at the factory, and I know I ain’t exactly what you wanted. B-but d’you reckon you can sort of put up with me anyway?”

“Aw, Bolts,” Bingo said happily, “I couldn’t ask for a better dog, and it doesn’t matter if your brain is trimmed. Boy, oh, boy, I never dreamed you’d be able to talk to animals! Why, it might even be of help on our space trip.”

Bolts wanted to ask where they were going in space, but all at once there was a buzzing in his head. “Bingo,” he said quickly, “we gotta scram. My built-in instinct says this is a bad place, and my sniffer tells me it belongs to Major Mangler.”

"Major Mangler!" Bingo stared at the equipment piled in the cave. "Why, this must be his emergency hideout. But, Bolts, he was captured. He won't come here now."

"Mebbe not, but something's wrong. We sure better move."

"But we can't leave till we find Claws. He's our cat." Bingo explained what had happened.

"I'll sniff him out," Bolts said. "You hurry on and watch for the Space Jumper."

Bolts raced across the cave, following his sniffer to a dark opening in one corner. Peering upward, he saw Claws's round green eyes peering down. "Hey, Claws!" he called. "This is Bolts. Come out

quick!"

"Meow," said Claws, in a small purry voice. "It's nice to meet you, but I see *no* reason for leaving. Anyway, I'm looking for bats."

"Bats! You ain't got time to fool with those critters! You better come out—and come out fast!"

"Don't be silly. I don't have to come out for anybody. I'll have you know I'm my own boss. I'm looking for bats, and I intend to find bats. So there!"

"O.K.," Bolts snapped. "If it's bats you want, it's bats you'll get." There was no time to waste, so he opened his mouth and loosened his Number Two growl.

The result was not as bad as it had been in the main cavern, but it was bad enough. The walls of the cave shook with sound. Bats poured squeaking from a hundred crevices, and down shot Claws like a black streak, every hair on end as he raced from the cave to seek Bingo's protection.

Bolts ran outside, and stopped abruptly. Just ahead of him Bingo was standing frozen, staring at a wild figure with bristling black whiskers staggering toward them around the curve of the canyon.

It was Major Mangler.

8

He Has a Date in Space

In escaping from the Air Patrol, Major Mangler had lost nearly everything, including his horse, his pistols, and most of his steam, but he still clung to a very wicked machete, which he instantly raised at the sight of Bingo. Realizing his secret hideout had been discovered, his temper began to boil again.

"Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely. "Speak up!" Then he caught sight of Bolts, and the machete almost fell from his hand. "*You*!" he screamed. "*You!* The cause of all my troubles! By the seven plagues …"

Suddenly he started forward with his machete swinging, this time bellowing in such a rage that the canyon began to echo with the fury of it.

There was only one thing to do, and Bolts did it. "Quick," he told Bingo, "put your fingers in your ears—and keep 'em plugged tight!"

In a flash he snapped forth his hackles and his teeth, put all his power into his unspeakable Number Three, and charged.

The result, to say the least, was quite ghastly. The narrow canyon, already full of echoes, shook and trembled with such a horror of multiplying sound that it was almost more than rock walls could bear. Major Mangler dropped his machete. In the next second he was knocked sprawling by the fierceness of Bolts's charge. He fell in a quivering heap, and for a while, now that his steam was all gone, even ceased to quiver. Poor Claws turned a double somersault in fright and lay so limp it seemed he had lost all his lives. Bingo, even with his fingers in his ears, was nearly petrified.

Bolts, though jangled to the ends of his circuits, managed to scramble into the cave, find a coil of line in the equipment, and return with it in his mouth.

"Help me, Bingo! We gotta tie up this varmint."

By the time they had Major Mangler securely bound, the Space Jumper had returned, and Big Butch was clumping toward them over the sand. Behind him came Pirate and the commander.

"Great gobbling guns!" Commander Brown exclaimed. "What have

you here?"

"The spy of spies!" cackled Pirate. "Ha! I said it would be a rewarding experience."

Bingo said, "Bolts captured him single-handed with his growl." He shuddered. "Whew! I hope I *never* hear such a sound again." He stooped and picked up Claws, who was just beginning to twitch.

"Good work, Bolts," the commander said approvingly. "You're starting off fairly well in spite of your shortcomings. I hope you're capable of the job ahead of you. It's going to be a tough one, and I'm afraid your growl won't be of much help."

"W-what kind of a job is it?" Bolts asked uneasily.

"We'll explain it later. We've lost so much time finding you that we have to hurry. Every minute counts. Butch, put the prisoner aboard. Bingo, you pilot us home, and I'll radio the Navy and the FBI. I want to get rid of the prisoner as soon as we land, and then load on supplies and equipment. Let's get going!"

"On the double!" cackled Pirate. "We've got a date with an asteroid!"

Bolts wondered what an asteroid was, but he didn't like to ask and expose the awful extent of his ignorance, especially in front of a smart bird like Pirate. Having a trimmed brain put him in a spot—for they had sure trimmed off a lot of extra knowledge a dog could use now. The thing to do, he figured, was to be real diplomatic and kind of hint around for answers.

But before he could get worked up to any diplomacy—except to tell Pirate what a handsome bird critter he was—the fastmoving Space Jumper had zipped back to Battleship Lane, and for the next half hour everything was confusion. There was a big to-do over the capture of the celebrated Major Mangler, and at the last minute, just as the guards were carrying him away, a swarm of reporters came rushing to the door.

"No time for interviews now," snapped the commander, very harassed. "We've a date in space, and it can't wait."

"But we heard Mangler was captured by a dog, single-handed!" a reporter burst out. "That's top news! What kind of dog is he? If we could see him—"

"You can see him later—if you can stand to listen to him. His speech is disgraceful."

The commander slammed the door and locked it, and ran puffing for the Space Jumper, which Big Butch and Bingo, with Bolts helping, had just finished loading.

"All aboard!" cackled Pirate. "Stow the gear later! We're off to catch a renegade!"

Bolts didn't at all care for the sound of that word. As soon as the

hatches were secured, and the Space Jumper was on its way again, he looked worriedly at the commander and asked, “What kind of a space varmint is this I gotta tangle with? A renegade asteroid?”

“Exactly,” said the commander. “But don’t ask me about it now. I’ve never been so exhausted. What a day! But thank heaven we’re off! Bingo, we’re hours late—you’ll have to make up for it by using full zip speed.”

“B-but, Pops,” Bingo protested. “I can’t stand that—and neither can you!”

“Nonsense. Put us on course, take an anti-addle pill and stay in your bunk while Butch handles the buttons. If we miss that thing while it’s still in orbit, we’ll be days getting home and the food will be gone—and where will I be?”

“I’d hate to guess,” mumbled Bingo. “It would sure be a calamity.”

Commander Brown sank with a long sigh upon his bunk, swallowed an anti-addle pill, and went instantly to sleep. Presently, with the Space Jumper on course and zipping so fast that outlines were getting fuzzy, Bingo took a pill and curled up on the other bunk. Big Butch, at the button panel, pressed the last zip button, and suddenly everything faded completely.

Bolts skipped three ticks and almost stopped ticking. “Oh-h-h, w-woe is me!” he cried. “W-w-where am I?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” cackled Pirate. “He’s lost himself!”

“Shaddup!” growled Big Butch. “We all lose ourselves at this speed. It’s downright frightful. Bolts, you’ll be able to see things in a minute—but we’ll all look ghosty till it’s time to slow down.”

Soon Bolts was blinking around him in astonishment. He could see—but it was like having X-ray vision. He could see through everyone. It almost gave him the shakes.

“Ulp!” he gasped, blinking at the ghosty shape of Pirate. “I can see your heart beating!”

“Didn’t know he had a heart,” said Big Butch. “He’s only a crow in disguise.”

“Aw, Butch,” said Bolts, thinking he’d better remain diplomatic, “you know he’s a swell critter—even as a ghost.”

“I have my points,” Pirate admitted, preening himself. “I’m glad you recognize them. It shows you’re not as stupid as you look.”

Big Butch snorted. “I still say he’s a crow and oughta be boiled for the cat.”

“He’d be poor pickings,” said a small voice from under a bunk. “I’d rather try a bat.”

“By Joe!” said Bolts, blinking at the dim shape of Claws. “How come you’re aboard?”

“I go where I please,” said Claws, eyeing him reproachfully. “Don’t

talk to me. I don't like the way you growl—not one little bit!"

"Aw, don't be a sorehead 'cause I fuzzed you up," Bolts protested. "I gotta protect folks, see?"

Big Butch said, "Hey, Bolts, you're the only one here who can understand Claws. What's he saying?"

"Don't—you—ever—repeat—what—I—say," Claws warned. "If you do, I'll never tell you a secret—and I know plenty."

"O.K.," Bolts agreed, and looked at Big Butch. "We were just getting acquainted. I was aiming to ask him about that renegade asteroid."

Claws shuddered. "Let's talk about something else."

"That asteroid's a nightmare," Big Butch admitted. "I'm afraid it's going to be all a young dog can handle. Is your battery up good?"

Bolts skipped a tick. "I—I could do with a little recharging."

"Then you'd better start recharging right now. We'll be there in three hours."

"I-I'd recharge better if you'd sorta wise me up first. H-how big is this varmint?"

"Too big to be easy," Big Butch grumbled, "and devilish black on his mean side. That's the side you'll have to tackle him from."

"Ulp!" said Bolts, and skipped another tick. "How come I gotta tangle with his mean side?"

"Because that's where the trouble is."

"W-what kind of trouble?"

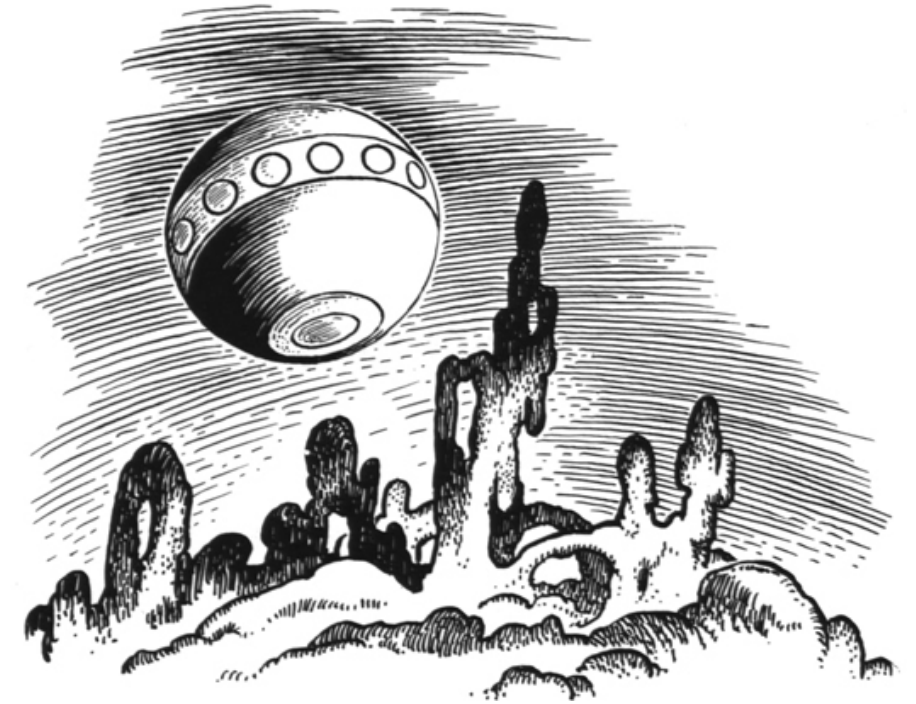
"Dunno," said Big Butch. "Nobody knows—not even Pirate. His second sight won't work so far in space. So here is where you come in."

By this time poor Bolts was not only badly confused and upset, but with everything so ghosty around him his one desire was to crawl under a bunk and never come out.

Then he gave himself a little shake, and said, "I'm kinda shy on experience. If I gotta chaw this asteroid down to size, seems I oughta know more about him. What's the deal, Butch? Gimme all the facts."

"It's like this," Big Butch began. "Bingo's got a telescope, and he spotted this thing coming in fast from nowhere and starting to curve around the sun. It wasn't an ordinary asteroid gone wild, because it was bright blue—like a big blue marble or maybe a little blue moon."

"B-blue marble—b-blue moon?"



"That's right. So we hopped in the Space Jumper and flew out to have a look at it. Queerest thing you ever saw. All blue glass. It was sizzling hot and mostly melted on the sunny side, so we flew around to the dark side to land. It was like coming down in an ink bottle. Even with the searchlights on, we couldn't make out much—and I've got super vision. But we could tell the glass wasn't melted here—it was just lumpy, and all worn down and crumbly."

Big Butch paused. "Do you sort of see the place now?"

"Yup," said Bolts, feeling a little easier. It had finally dawned on him what an asteroid was. "B-but what's all the trouble about?"

"Just this," said Big Butch. "That lumpy worn-down glass didn't look like much to me, but Bingo got the idea that it might be an old glass city."

"A *glass city*!"

"That's what Bingo thought. A glass city all gone crumbly with age. There was no way to explore it in the dark, though we anchored and tried. Terribly rough! Then Bingo got out his space camera. It's a special atomic job that takes clear pictures in black dark. He took a few shots from the Space Jumper, and he had me set it up outside on a high spot for a time exposure."

Big Butch paused again. "I hate to tell you the rest."

"W-what happened?"

"My imagination fails me. When I started through the air lock to get

the camera, I found we'd gone adrift. Our anchor had been stolen."

"Stolen!"

"And that's not all. When I finally reached the spot where I'd set up the camera, it was gone too."

"Oh, no!"

"It was," Big Butch said gravely. "And Bingo wants it back. Your job is to sniff it out—if you can. And while you're sniffing you'll have a thimble-size camera strapped around your neck. It'll be wound up and taking pictures of everything that crosses your path."

"Ulp!" muttered Bolts, staring at him. "You mean I gotta go all alone in the black dark, through a place like that, and tangle with a bunch of I-dunno-whats, and—and—Why, that city may be *crawling* with all kinds of ornery glass space varmints!"

"It probably is," Big Butch agreed in a sad voice. "That's why I'm advising you to start recharging right now. Buster, you're going to need all the juice and jump you've got in you or you're a gone dog for sure."

Poor Bolts crawled miserably under a bunk, curled up, and instantly his circuits clicked off. He hoped, at least, to have one pleasant dream before he clicked on again. But his recharging was a long nightmare, filled with invisible glass critters that chased him endlessly through the dark.

He awoke suddenly, twitching and groaning, to hear Pirate squawk, "Hit the deck and look alive! We're almost there!"

9
He Sniffs a Strange Trail

Bolts crawled out glumly, blinking his eye lights. He was only slightly relieved to find that the Space Jumper had slowed down, and that vision was back to normal. Bingo was busy with the buttons, his red hair in a wild tangle. Beyond, Big Butch was hurrying to place food on the cabin table, where the commander sat drumming his fingers impatiently.

"Jiminy, Pops," Bingo said nervously, "how can you eat anything at a time like this?"

"At a time like this," snapped the commander, "I'd expire if I didn't eat. Bolts," he demanded, "how do you feel?"

"Kinda cautious," Bolts admitted. "Butch gave me the low-down on that camera deal. Something as queer as that sure wrecks a feller's gumption."

"But—but don't you realize how important this is?" Bingo exclaimed. "You've got the chance of a lifetime. Why, if that really *is* a glass city, it's the biggest discovery of the century! It—it might even have glass people in it!"

"That's what curdles me," grumbled Bolts. "It's mighty sure got *something* in it."

"Bolts," said Commander Brown, "your job is to find that something, and find it fast. Our time is limited. The asteroid has already curved around the sun, and now it's shooting out into space, away from Earth. This is our last chance to examine it. We'll land in three minutes in the middle of the dark side, and you'll start your hunt immediately. If you're not back in six hours, we'll be forced to abandon you. Understand?"

"Yup," Bolts said dolefully.

Bingo swallowed. "Bolts, there's no atmosphere on the asteroid, so it won't be easy for you to pick up a trail. But you've got the best sniffer in the world, and I'm sure it'll lead you in the right direction." Bingo paused and looked at him earnestly. "Only you can find what we're after. Cancan we depend on you?"

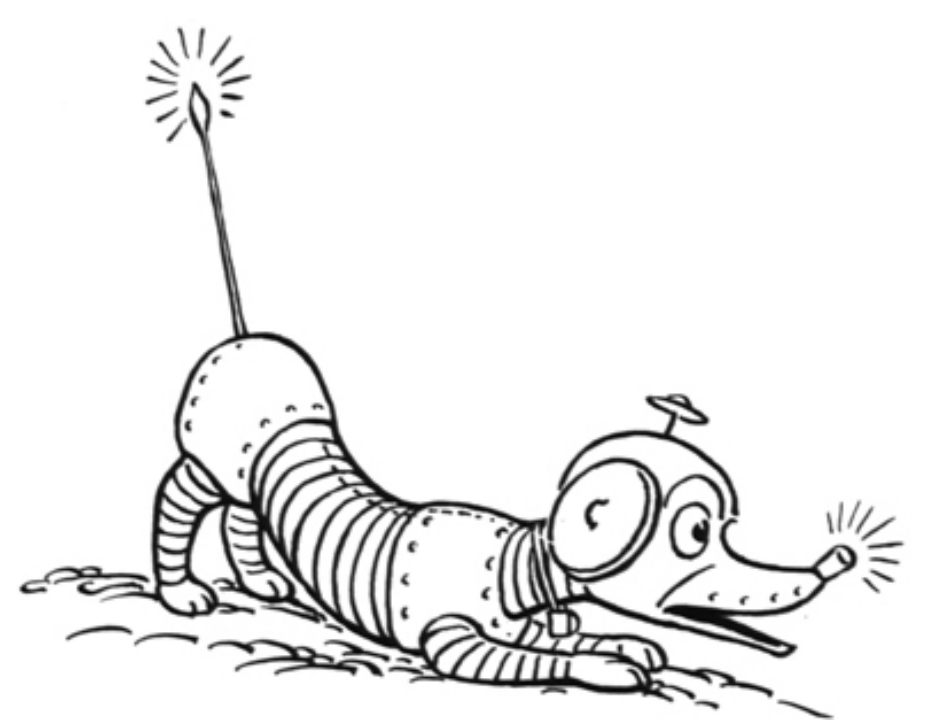
"Aw, Bingo," Bolts assured him, after giving himself a little shake, "'course you can depend on me! I'm your dawg, and I'll find out what's cookin' if I have to chaw that place apart!"

The strange asteroid was getting closer, and he was startled to see it

so clearly in the forward viewing port. It did look like a blue moon. It grew larger and brighter blue second by second. Then gradually it narrowed to a sliver and suddenly vanished as they curved around to the dark side of it. Absolutely nothing could be seen as the Space Jumper slid cautiously down through absolute blackness.

It touched the surface, bounced slightly, and steadied. Bingo strapped a tiny camera around Bolts's neck, and Big Butch hurried to open the hatch to the air lock.

"Poor, poor dog," Pirate squawked sadly as Bolts scrambled into the air lock behind Butch. "And so young and innocent. It wrings my heartstrings—"



"Aw, shaddup before you drown in your own tears," Big Butch grumbled, closing the hatch with a bang. "I declare if the old crow isn't softening up! Don't you worry, Bolts. I know you can do the job. I'll be waiting for you right outside, guarding the anchor till you get back. Good luck, and watch the gravity!"

Big Butch opened the outer hatch, and Bolts slid through into the strange dark world of crumbling glass.

His night vision, with the aid of the light from the Space Jumper's ports, showed that they had come down in a deep depression. He circled it carefully, sniffing. As soon as he was sure of his footing, he went bounding upward to the dim twisted shapes beyond. There was so little gravity that he weighed only ounces instead of pounds, and he

found he could span great distances with very little effort. Almost before he realized it, the Space Jumper was hidden behind him. In this airless place there was not even a glow from its lights.

Bolts reached a small open area, and paused to rotate his sniffer. Instantly he was aware of a familiar smell—the same frightening smell he had found in the cavern with the fox critter.

It was the Terrible Unknown.

Thinking he'd better tame it a bit, he opened his mouth and tried to loosen his Number Two growl. But no sound came forth.

"By Joe!" he told himself, "I clean forgot it won't work without air. This is bad."

Just to be on the safe side, he raised his hackles and snapped out his teeth. Then he plunged onward, circling and following his sniffer. It was comforting, at this uncertain time, to remember that he was no longer an inexperienced dog, green off the assembly line. Why, he'd kicked around in some tough places and tangled with all kinds of things! "Pshaw," he told himself, "what's a little more dark?"

Something moved in the dimness far ahead.

Bolts stopped, feeling his circuits squirm. Was that a glass varmint? His night vision, which grayed the blackness in front of him, couldn't make out a thing. There were only the worn and twisted shapes that might once have been buildings, and in the dark they reminded him very much of the way the cavern had looked.

But something *had* moved. He was sure of it.

He was suddenly relieved to hear Bingo's voice on his radio. "Have you found a trail yet, Bolts?"

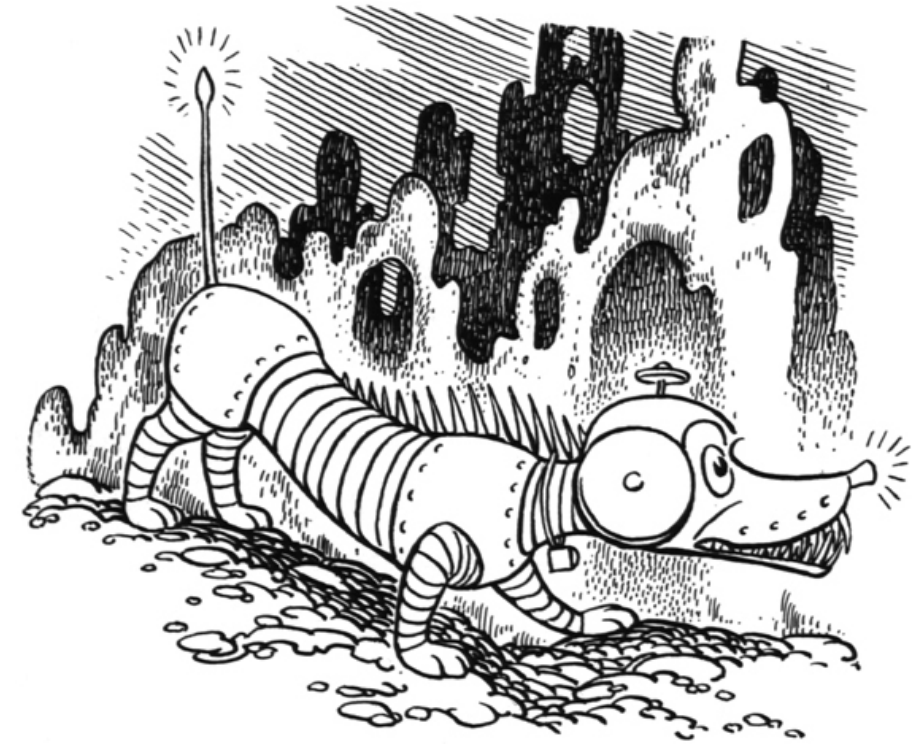
"N-not exactly," he answered, thankful that his radio worked here, even if his growl didn't. "B-but I'm sure getting warm. I spotted something."

"What was it?"

"Dunno. But mebbe my camera caught it."

"Careful! Don't get too close to it until you find out how dangerous it is!"

Bolts crept on cautiously to the place where he had seen the movement. His sniffer was suddenly aware of a trace of something. It was so faint that he couldn't even think of it as a smell—it was hardly even a ghost of a scent. He swung left in the direction of it, and began following it in and out among the crumbling glass shapes.



Sometimes he lost the scent altogether, and had to spend precious time circling before he picked it up again. Finally, with his sniffer to the ground, he discovered that the scent was stronger every twelve feet, and realized with dismay that the thing was taking twelve-foot steps.

"Great grisly grief!" he burst out, awed. "What kind of a monster critter is this?"

"Did you find something, Bolts?" Bingo called anxiously.

"Ain't come face-to-face with the varmint, and I dunno as I really want to." He told Bingo about the astonishingly long steps.

"Maybe it's just the gravity," Bingo offered. "If the thing's moving fast, it wouldn't have to be so awfully big to take such steps. But watch yourself!"

"You're tellin' me! I'm mighty glad I ain't edible."

"Bolts," said Bingo, in sudden concern. "I—I wouldn't be too sure about that. Anything's possible in a place like this. Remember, there's no metal on this asteroid—and our anchor was stolen along with the camera. Don't forget you're practically all metal yourself."

"Ulp!" muttered Bolts, and slowed down to think things over. He could understand now how the little burro must have felt. "Aw," he told himself. "I'll worry about that later. Anyhow, I got teeth. If there's any chawing to be done, I'll do my share."

He went on, more cautiously than ever, pausing at every turn to examine the way before exposing himself. The critter might be lying in wait, watching for a chance to pounce on him.

The trail was becoming very hard to follow. The critter was taking longer steps, and even making great leaps from one high spot to another. Bolts stopped at last in confusion. He had made a wide circle and he could still pick up the scent now and then—but it led nowhere. The critter had outfoxed him.

"Anything wrong, Bolts?" Bingo asked.

"Plenty! I can't figger whether I got the varmint treed or not. I've lost him—but he's somewhere close."

"Look around you carefully. He may be hiding overhead. You don't want him to jump on you!"

"He ain't overhead, Bingo. And he ain't behind nothing. I been watching mighty sharp."

"Then he's gone underground," said Bingo.

"Can't find a hole no place."

"But there must be a hole!" Bingo insisted. "Unless he's fooled you and gotten away."

"He can't fool my sniffer, Bingo. He's somewhere within fifty feet of me. Either he's turned invisible, or—by Joe! What's that?"

"D-do you see him?" Bingo asked excitedly.

"Naw, but I can't believe what I do see!" Bolts trotted forward into a slight hollow. At the foot of what may have been a wall lay a very strange object.

"What is it?" Bingo cried.

"Flowers—a bouquet of 'em!"

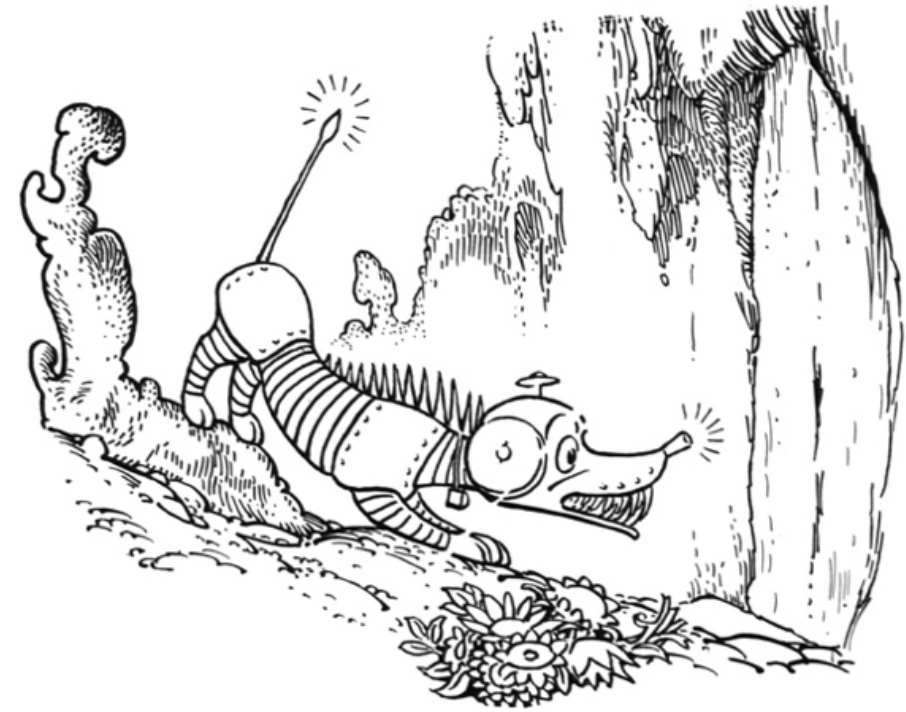
"Impossible!" It was Commander Brown on the radio now. "Bolts, have you lost your reason?"

"Nope. Reckon I know flowers when I see 'em. This is a mighty pretty bunch-looks like they're fresh out of the garden. Can't tell the colors in the dark, but—"

"I still say it's impossible. Flowers can't grow in a place like this!"

"Mebbe they don't—but they're here. And don't ask me what they're doing here—unless that critter dropped 'em. By Joe, I gotta look into this! Hold everything a minute."

Bolts moved the bouquet of flowers out of the way, and turned his sniffer on the wall. The scent was strong here, stronger than it had been anywhere. The wall seemed to be of solid glass, crumbly on the surface, but when he examined it more carefully he discovered that there were long cracks in it—long, deep cracks about two feet apart. Was this a door of some kind?



He placed his flexible paws against it and pushed hard. Something gave a little. It was a door!

Suddenly Bolts paused. What kind of critter was this that went hopping around a glass asteroid with a bouquet of flowers in his claws? A critter that probably ate anchors and cameras, as well as tin dogs if he could get his nippers into one.… But no, that didn't make sense. It sure didn't go with flowers.

"Bolts," came Bingo's voice in his radio. "What are you doing now? Watch it—those flowers may be a trap!"

"Ulp!" said Bolts, backing away from the door. "I didn't think of that! Bingo, these flowers were right in front of his den. There's a kind of a door here, and I can sniff him strong on the other side. Reckon he's trying to bait me in so he can grab me?"

"I don't know what to think! I just wish there was some way you could communicate with him."

"By Joe, I'm gonna try it! If I can talk to Earth critters, mebbe I can get myself across to a space varmint. If he tries any tricks, I got my teeth ready to chaw him."

Bolts faced the door again. In his fiercest voice, which naturally made no audible sound in this airless place, he demanded, "Hey, you! Come out and show yourself!"

There was no answer.

He moved closer to the door, and sang forth with all the threat he

could muster, “Come out, you ornery varmint—or I’ll bust the door down and give you a good chawing!”

Bolts hoped he had made it strong enough, for a tin dog on the smallish side couldn’t take chances with a monster that took twelve-foot steps and probably fed on anchors.

He was astounded, therefore, when a small timid voice replied in fright, “Go away, invader! Go away! I’ve nothing you want!”

10
He Becomes a VID

Bolts stood blinking at the door, hardly believing what he'd heard. Then he cried, "Hey, you've got me wrong! I'm no invader!"

"You are too an invader!" replied the timid voice. "Only invaders chase and threaten. And I've seen you—you're utterly horrible!"

"Aw, I can't help my looks," Bolts grumbled. "I know they ain't much, but I was made this way. Sorry I put you in a tizzy—I was only aiming to get acquainted."

"I want nothing to do with you! You're a monster with strange powers. You don't even speak a proper and understandable language—yet I can understand you when speech is impossible. Go away and leave me in peace!"

"I ain't no monster!" Bolts snapped. "I'm a tin dawg with a trimmed brain, and I can talk to any kind of a critter." He explained about his trimmed brain. "I came a long way to meet you. I was made special so I could track you down and find out about you, and I ain't leaving till I do. Now open up the door and let's get acquainted!"

There was a silence. Then the thing behind the door said slowly, "Who sent you here to track me down and threaten me?"

"I wasn't sent here to threaten you! But I had to get a rise outa you somehow—and I sure wasn't taking no chances with something I never seen before. The first time my people came here you stole their anchor and their camera, and that kinda worried 'em. By Joe, when a critter—"

"They worried *me!* I took the objects, hoping they might be presents—I did need them badly for their metal. But before I could offer anything in return, your people were gone. Why do you call them *people*? Surely there are no *real* people in this empty corner of the universe!"

"Then you don't know from nothing! By Joe, my people are real, and they don't come better!"

"I find that hard to believe," the timid voice replied. "Good people would *never* send a horror like you on a friendly mission!"

"Aw, come off it!" Bolts pleaded impatiently. "I can't yak forever through a closed door. Time's running out, and I'll have to go soon. I dunno how reliable you are, but if you'll let me in, I'll promise not to tangle with you if you don't tangle with me. Is that a deal?"

"My honor is unquestionable," the hidden critter retorted, somewhat miffed. "Furthermore, I find violence deplorable. I—I suppose I'll have to face you, for I have no way of keeping you out. You have my permission to enter—but please do so slowly. The sight of you is almost more than I can bear."

"O.K.," said Bolts. "I ain't looking forward to this no more than you are—but here I come."

He had kept his radio on all during the conversation, and he knew that Bingo could at least hear his own part of it, if not what the other critter said. Now suddenly Bingo called worriedly, "Careful, Bolts! You don't know what you're getting into!"

"Sure don't," he said glumly. "But I gotta do it."

He put his paws upon the door again, and slowly, carefully, began to push. The worn section of glass between the cracks swung inward, and all at once Bolts found himself staring into a dimly lighted workroom.

In his wildest dreams he could never have imagined such a place. Flowers and parts of flowers were everywhere—on the walls, hanging from the ceiling, spilling from vases, overflowing cubbyholes and shelves, and littering the workbench. There were great glowing blossoms of all kinds and colors, delicate flowers of incredible shapes, clumps of flowers bursting into gorgeous bloom …

Bolts gaped, blinking his eye lights forty to the second before he saw a movement in the far corner. Cringing there, half hidden by the flowers, was a wispy, spindly robot who seemed to be half flower himself. The robot had a big head not unlike an unopened bud, and under it a body so slender it might have been a flower stem. Bolts saw two big frightened eyes staring back at him, and instantly two pairs of slender hands shot up and covered the eyes.

"O-o-o-oh!" cried the spindly robot. "I can't bear the sight of you! Go away! Go away!"

"Aw, for the luvva Pete!" Bolts grumbled. "I know I ain't no blooming rose—but I ain't no creep either! Why, I've been told I'm right personable!"

"Personable!" screamed the robot. "Did—did you ever *see* yourself?"

"Why-why, no," Bolts admitted. "Ain't never been around a mirror."

"Then take a good look!" The robot lifted a square of polished glass from the wall and, carefully averting his eyes, held it in front of Bolts.

"Ulp!" he gasped, backing away from the awful thing with gleaming teeth and raised hackles that glared back at him from the glass. He'd entirely forgotten he was still rigged for combat.

Quickly he lowered his hackles and slid his teeth out of sight. "By Joe!" he exclaimed, secretly pleased with his formidable appearance, "I bet I could curdle milk if I put my mind to it. Do I look better

now?"

"I—I can hardly believe the difference!" the spindly robot exclaimed. "It's incredible. Why, I do believe you *are* rather personable."

"Natch," said Bolts. "Now mebbe we can yak a bit. You got a name?"

"Slimmillillibit," replied the robot. "It's an ancient and respectable name."

"Must be! It's sure a king-size mouthful! Reckon I'd better call you Slim. I'm Bolts—Bolts Brown, that is. You got me kinda loopy with all these flowers. Where'd they come from? You sure didn't raise 'em here!"

"I made them," Slim said. "From the glass. There's no other material available."

"B—but they can't be glass! They don't bust up when you touch 'em—and they bend!"

"Oh, it has to be softened. I have my methods. I'm mostly glass myself, you know."

"Naw!"

"Oh, yes. Special glass. I'm bendable, but quite unbreakable and practically indestructible. All my family is the same way, and I expect the oldest one of us is still busy somewhere. I'll have you know I'm from a long and honorable super-glass line, and naturally would be a great credit to any proper household. But alas, I fear I'm doomed to spend eternity here."

"For what?" Bolts asked. "You done something wrong?"

"Certainly not! Did you come here to insult me? The idea! There's never been the least suspicion of criminal inclinations in any of us."

Bolts was becoming confused. "Then how come you're wasting your time on a runaway asteroid making glass flowers? Ain't you got nothing better to do?"

"Better?" Slim exclaimed, aghast. "If one has time to spend, how can it be better spent than in making flowers? I'm afraid you're from a very *low* order of beings. A creature that has no appreciation of flowers is lower than an insect, and I refuse to associate with it. As lonesome as I am, I must ask you to leave."

"Aw," Bolts protested, "I never said nothing against flowers! These are downright triple-extra. What I mean is, did you come here special to make 'em?"

"I came here," Slim said haughtily, "to mine for glass. This place happens to be the family glass mine."

"Glass mine! Never heard of such a thing!"

"You're distressingly ignorant. Here we mined the basic material for our super-glass. All my family is made from it. We have our own

factory, you see."

"Your own factory! You—you mean you make yourselves?"

"Who else could make us?" Slim raised his head proudly. "Don't you realize how very special my family is? Each of us comes equipped with a knowledge of the forty-seven most proper languages of the universe. After an apprenticeship in our factory, we are capable of serving anywhere—among proper people, of course. Naturally, we reserve the right to choose our household." Slim paused, and shook his head sadly. "But I'm afraid my day will never come to serve."

"But–but what's keeping you? Why—"

"Unfortunately," said Slim, "I am marooned here. It happened, oh, ever so long ago. This asteroid—it was practically next door to the factory—passed through a magnetic storm and went wild. I was all alone on it at the time, and the storm was so great that it was impossible to rescue me. Now, of course, rescue is forever out of the question."

At this moment Commander Brown called worriedly on the radio. "Bolts, time's passing! What's going on? What have you found?"

"Excuse me, Slim," said Bolts. "I gotta talk to the big boss. Commander, this critter is a skinny robot, name of Slim, who got marooned here. He's a wiz with glass, and he needs rescuing bad. Reckon you could make a place for him on Battleship Lane?"

"Great guns!" cried the commander, very excited. "Where's he from?"

"A super-glass factory on the other side of nowhere."

"Heavens above! Are you sure he isn't dangerous?"

"Pshaw, he wouldn't hurt a flea."

"Then bring him along! This is the greatest find of the century!"

"Slim," said Bolts, "consider yourself rescued as of now. The commander says he's got a place for you. So pack your ditty bag, and let's scram."

"I will not!" Slim said emphatically. "Haven't I made myself clear? My family has never served any but proper people. I couldn't possibly lower myself and do otherwise."

Bolts stared at him, astounded. Then he snapped, "Aw, get off your high horse and lissen to reason! My people are right outta the top drawer, and they don't come better!"

"I fear you're mistaken," Slim said haughtily. "Proper people are rare, and they certainly don't exist in this remote corner of the universe. Furthermore, the language you speak is anything but proper."

"Aw, you can't judge 'em by the way *I* talk. I'm only a tin dawg!"

"Well, if your people are so proper, what color is their blood?"

"Bright red, of course!"

"Oh, how garish! Don't you know that the best blood is blue?"

"Pshaw!" Bolts turned away in disgust. "I never seen such a highfalutin' critter! If you'd rather stay here on your lonesome and yak with the space bats till you're batty, it's up to you. *I*'m goin' to Battleship Lane."

"Wait!" Slim cried. "I—I don't *want* to stay here. But I simply can't allow myself to choose *im*properly. There's one absolute and positive proof about people." He clenched his four hands together nervously, then asked almost in a whisper, "H-how do they feel about—flowers?"

"Huh?" Bolts gaped at him. "What's flowers got to do with it?"

"Because," said Slim, "it takes a top-drawer brain to fully appreciate flowers. Only proper people have top-drawer brains."

Poor Bolts was suddenly doubtful. Somehow he'd got the idea that only sissies went in for flowers. And you sure couldn't call Bingo a sissy, or the commander either. On the other hand there wasn't anything wrong with their brains. Then he thought, By Joe, mebbe I'm the sissy one, 'cause I sure think these flowers are super! Or does that just prove I got me a real top-drawer brain?

Time was passing, and he knew there was only one thing to do.

"Slim," he said, "I got a feeling my whole gang would be downright loopy about these things—but don't take *my* word for it. Grab all you can carry, and come and see for yourself."

So it was that Bolts and Slim, much to the astonishment of everyone, presently appeared with enough glass blossoms to make the Space Jumper look like a florist's shop.

"Wow!" Bingo exclaimed in delight, practically overcome.

"Gleaming glory!" gasped the commander, also practically overcome. "I've never seen anything so gorgeous!"

"Blow me down!" said Big Butch, awed. "They're out of this world!"

"Out of this world!" cackled Pirate. "Out of this world!"

And even Claws, who had seldom glanced at a flower, nearly purred himself hoarse.

The happiest of all, of course, was Slim, for he was sure now that he had found a proper household.

By this time the asteroid was far past the earth's orbit, and every second was taking it farther and farther away. So naturally the flight home took them days instead of hours. In the beginning, poor Bolts almost overheated his brain trying to make proper translations for Slim and the commander. However, long before they landed at Battleship Lane, Slim was spouting English like a schoolteacher and was becoming scandalized by Bolts's speech and manners.

"I do appreciate all you've done for me," he told Bolts very politely. "And as a return favor I'm sure the commander will be pleased if I help you overcome your—ah—unutterable uncouthness. Surely it

must pain you to be a disgrace to such a—ah—top-drawer household."

"Ah, phooey!" Bolts grumbled, and crawled under a bunk beside Claws. "Whaddaya want out of a tin dawg? Life's plenty rough as it is."

But it got rougher as Slim persisted, and if Bolts had ever thought Slim might be slightly sissy because of his manners and flower-making, he soon changed his mind. Slim was as tough and stubborn as the special glass that had been used to create him.

The commander had radioed of their success on the asteroid, and when the Space Jumper landed, there was a swarm of reporters to meet them. But at their first sight of Bolts, everyone was disappointed. He looked so foolish and innocent, and he felt beaten down from so much of Slim's stubborn schooling. The photographers who wanted his picture shook their heads.

"It's hard to believe," said one, "that anything like you ever captured Major Mangler single-handed, besides doing what you did on the asteroid. I'm afraid a picture of you wouldn't be very convincing."

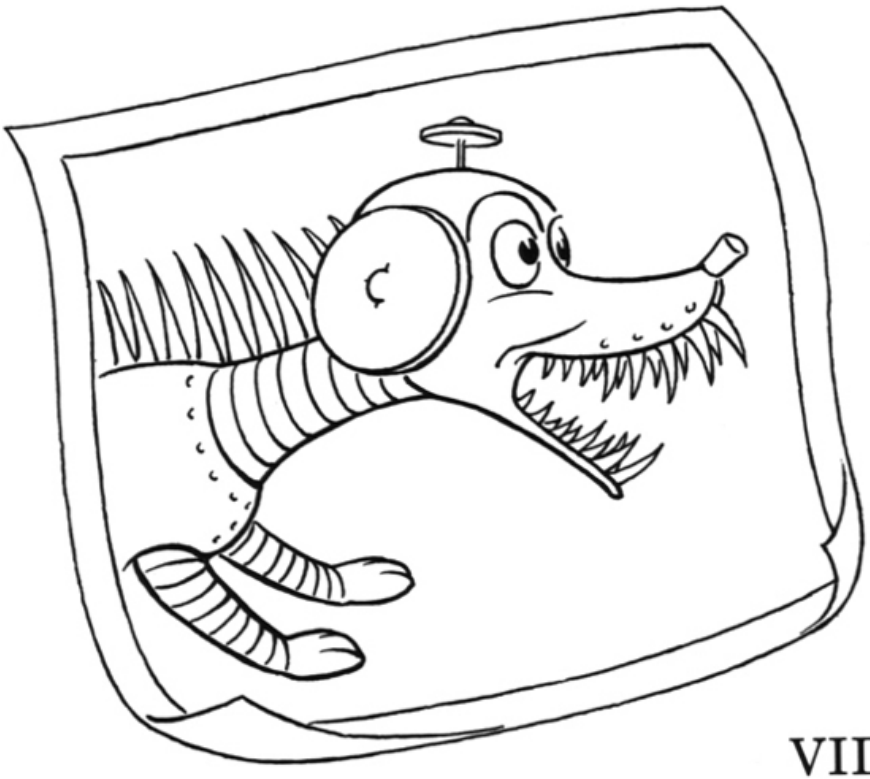
"How about a little action?" suggested another. "Could you show us how you captured Major Mangler?"

"Aw," Bolts pleaded, "I don't want to shiver nobody—I mean anybody."

They laughed. "Oh, come on! Give us some action!"

"O.K., fellers. You asked for it." He raised his steel hackles, snapped out his terrible teeth, loosened his nerve-shattering Number Two, and gave a sample charge in Slim's direction.

Slim shrieked and fell quivering, and nearly everyone ran. There was such a panic that Bolts almost missed getting his picture in the papers. It hardly mattered, for all the papers carried long pieces about him, and soon everyone knew he was a Very Important Dog.



VID

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets: A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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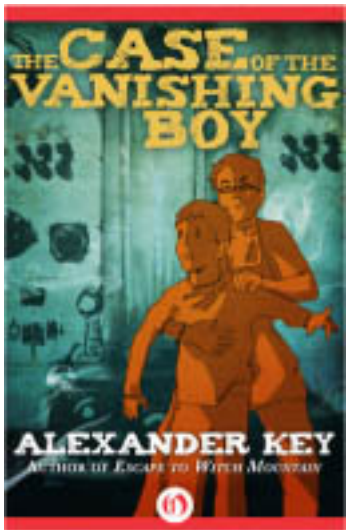

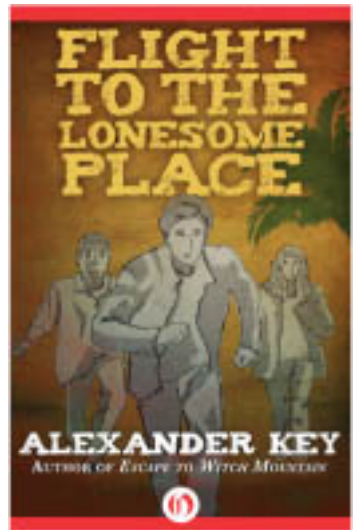

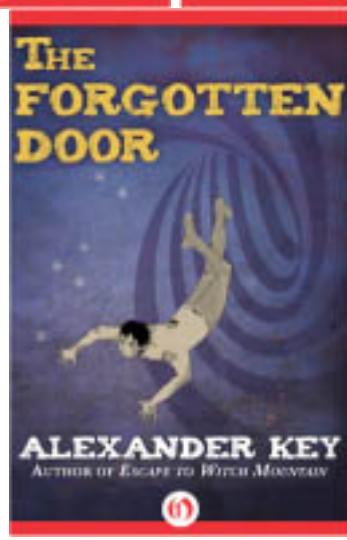

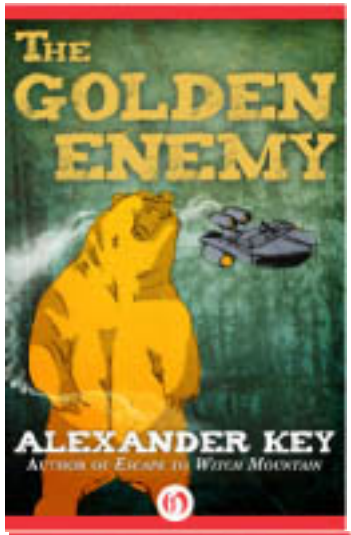
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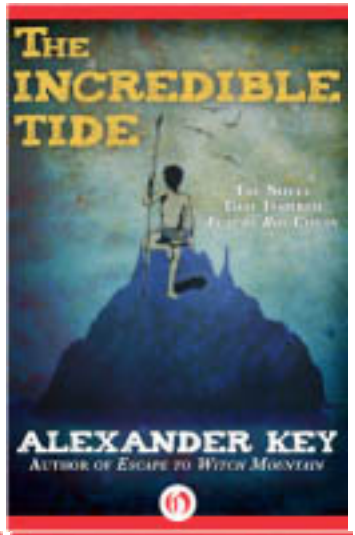
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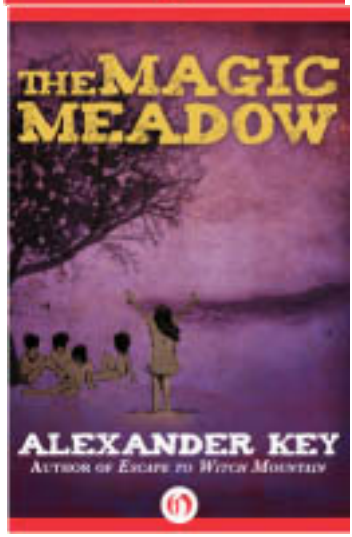
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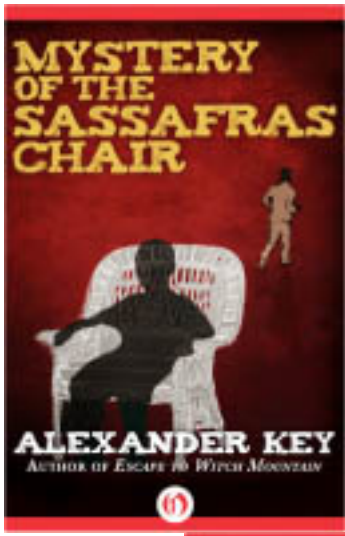

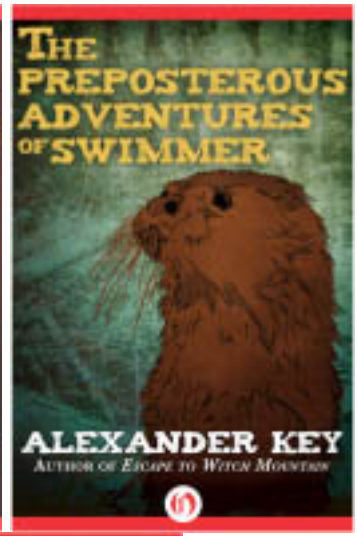

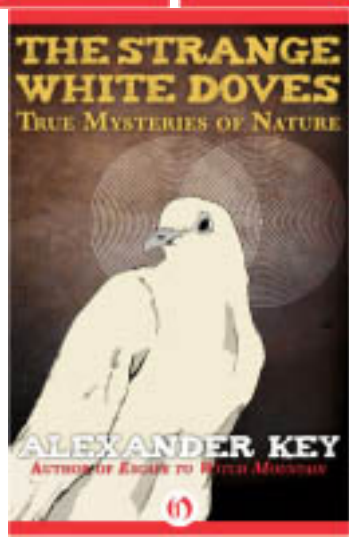

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